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ABSTRACT

This book is a collection of speeches by M. Hayes Mizell. The book is divided into three parts. In part 1, Mizell reviews some of the challenges middle schools must overcome to become effective places of teaching and learning. His suggestions range from developing a new kind of middle school principal to better serving young people's "raging" intellects and the adoption of a "whatever it takes" philosophy that will lead to improved schools. In part 2, Mizell reminds his audiences that the key to successful reform is an unwavering commitment to help students learn. While some might encounter difficulties to better schools, everyone must keep his or her eye on the ultimate goal--serving "all children well." In part 3, Mizell cautions that "academic standards do not guarantee success." However, when coupled with professional development, they can be useful tools to help ensure students move forward academically and "help schools and educators become more accountable for their results." The book concludes with a speech in which Mizell reviewed the history of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Program for Student Achievement and listed some of the most important lessons from his 10 years of experience as director of the program. (RT)

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Shooting for the Sun

The Message of Middle School Reform

Selected Remarks of M. Hayes Mizell

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Shooting for the Sun

The Message of Middle School Reform

Selected Remarks of M. Hayes Mizell

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Shooting for the Sun: The Message of Middle School Reform, by M. Hayes Mizell

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Shooting for the Sun: The Message of Middle School Reform

Selected Remarks of M. Hayes Mizell on Middle School Reform, School Improvement, and Academic Standards and Accountability

Foreword 5

Part I. The Challenge of Middle School Reform

The New Middle School Principal 11
Raging Intellects 27
30 and Counting: Why the Middle School Movement Has Not Reached Its Potential 36
Six Steps to an Achieving Middle School 47
Middle School Reform: Where Are We Now? 64
The War We Are In 74
Who Will Advocate for Middle School Reform? 84

Part II. Getting it Done

SHAZAM! No Lightning Bolts in School Improvement 93
The Rocky Trail of Standards-Based Reform 106
Hitting the Wall 114
What You're Cookin' vs. What They're Smellin' 121
All Children Well 132

Part III. Academic Standards and Accountability

Is Staff Development a Smart Investment? 149
Academic Standards: The Beauty and Terror 164
Watching for Mr. Hyde 172
What If There Were No State Test? 182
Professional Development: The State It's In 193

Conclusion—Where We Are Now

Ten Years of Middle School Reform: A Few Lessons 203

Foreword

WHEN HE WAS just fourteen Hayes Mizell won first prize (and five dollars) in a young author contest sponsored by the Memphis *Commercial Appeal.* The judges singled out his five-paragraph short story because of its "understanding and well-expressed sense of the principles of American ideals, democracy, brotherhood and fair play."

Fifty years later, it's hard to come up with a more apt description of the guiding beliefs that have been at the root of Hayes's unstinting efforts to improve education for America's middle grades students. This book, a collection of "oral essays" on that subject, reveals a never-ending optimism—perhaps a true American idealism—that schools can and should be places where all students achieve at high levels.

While holding on to that dream, Hayes also has always been a realist about the challenges that stand in the way of even the most committed and tireless educators. Still, few people can leaven that painful realism with greater ease than Hayes who has a boundless reservoir of humor that he readily draws upon. For example, he once said the

pressure on school leaders was like being asked "to produce 'tofu data' that on the one hand is dry and tasteless and on the other hand can absorb nearly any flavor of interpretation." In the same speech (p. 133), he recalled a popular Gary Larson cartoon depicting Rex the Wonder Dog balancing an impossible number of objects as he walks the highwire. "High above the hushed crowd," the caption reads, "Rex tried to remain focused. Still, he couldn't shake one nagging thought: He was an old dog and this was a new trick."

Balancing frankness with irony and colorful metaphors, Hayes never has shied from the challenge of walking a tightrope of his own as he delivered tough messages about obligation to students and accountability to communities. His straightforward style violates the "passive voice" approach favored by many public school educators who prefer not to utter (or hear) statements that assign direct responsibility for results.

Every speech you will read here resonates with the same core message: The surest way to break the cycle of underachievement is to make absolutely certain young people gain the skills and knowledge they need to become self-sufficient, lifelong learners. And the surest way to reach this goal is to hold every student and every educator to high standards.

As Hayes plays variations on this theme, he shares a decade of insights he and the Foundation's Program for Student Achievement have gained about standards-based

middle grades reform. In these speeches he examines the meaning of reform, the need for clear standards, the poor quality of most professional development, the importance of principal leadership, and the vital role of the central office in signaling the significance of any reform initiative.

In one of his most recent speeches ("All Children Well," page 132"), Hayes offered educators participating in the Student Achievement Program the following assessment of the work he and others have been doing in districts committed to standards-based reform: "We were shooting for the sun and I do not apologize for it."

For those who know Hayes, those remarks are anything but hyperbole. Never once would he consider anything less than a quality education for *every* middle schooler as the reason for this work. He went on to remind the assembled educators:

> ...(W)e are doing [this work] because we know that most students in your communities depend now and will depend in the future on your school systems.... You know students who have abilities and talents their schools do not recognize or seek to discover. You know students who are satisfied with achieving the minimum because their schools establish that as the maximum. You know students whose intelligence is devalued because their teachers do not know enough to tap it.... You know that if your schools were truly performing at high levels, nearly all your students would be performing at high levels.

> This is why we are here again, but we will not always be here, or places like this, together. You have learned a lot, you have accomplished a lot, but there is much more to be done. Learn from the past six years, but do not be a captive of them. Look towards the future and determine how you want it to be different from the past. Most of all, be resolute, be brave, be determined, be tenacious in creating school systems that *serve all children well.*

Many people, including Hayes's co-workers, colleagues and admirers, encouraged us to bring together in a single volume some of his most thoughtful and inspirational speeches about how we all can do better for our kids. We'll leave it to our readers to judge for themselves if this collection lives up to and reflects the ideals that Hayes's work has always been about. Having had the pleasure of working with him for a number of years, I already know the answer to that question.

Michael A. Bailin

President
The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation

Part I.

The Challenge of Middle School Reform

In this series of speeches, Hayes Mizell reviews some of the challenges middle schools must overcome to become effective places of teaching and learning. His suggestions range from developing a new kind of middle school principal to better serving young people's "raging" intellects and the adoption of a "whatever it takes" philosophy that will lead to improved schools.

The New Middle School Principal

An achieving middle school must have a new kind of principal, one who sets high standards and gives teachers and students the tools and support they need to succeed. Hayes Mizell defined this powerful new role at a gathering of middle school principals in Louisville, Kentucky, in July 1994.

ALL ACROSS AMERICA, new schools are in the making. On the outside, these schools may not seem new at all; most people who pass by them notice no difference. The schools are not new because they have new buildings, but because they have new purpose and operate differently from schools we increasingly refer to as "regular" schools.

New schools go by many different names. Some are magnet or choice or charter schools that describe their new focus by including in their names words like "academic," "traditional," "ecology," "African-American," "fine arts," or "technology." Other new schools are the result of joint ventures between school systems and the private sector. In San Jose, the settlement of a school desegregation case called for all middle schools to pattern themselves after Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools.

Other urban school systems have launched new schools based on James Comer's School Development Program, or Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools, or Mortimer Adler's Paideia Schools, or the Montessori or Total Quality Management models. In Corpus Christi, the school system "disestablished" a failing school. All the school's faculty had to resign, and if they wanted to

teach there the following year they had to reapply to do so. The school reopened with a fine arts theme, a new principal, and a mostly new faculty.

There are many reasons for this national movement to create new schools, but the primary reason is that more and more people are concluding that existing schools, operating under existing rules, are not educating most young people very well. Over the next decade it will be interesting to observe whether this movement gains momentum. One would hope that most schools are not so dysfunctional or unyielding that they will reform only if they become new schools similar to the ones I have described. Yet there is little doubt that all schools need to pick up the pace of reform and intensify their focus on enabling students to perform at high levels. All schools need to become "new," whether or not they have a different name or special status.

The achieving school requires a new kind of principal

There is at least one thing that new schools and regular schools have in common. In both, the principal is central to shaping the direction and climate of the school. Newly created schools often begin with a new principal because school systems know that if parents and students are to believe the school is truly "new," the principal must be new also. It is not yet clear whether school systems can reform regular schools only by appointing new principals, but it is clear that there will be no reform unless principals become new. The phrase "new principal" refers not only to a different person in the building who holds the position of principal, it means a principal who behaves and leads differently.

Who is "the new principal?" The new principal may not even be called the "principal." He or she may be called the "building coordinator," "the school team leader," "the co-principal," or some other name that communicates that the person does not exercise control

through hierarchical authority but by forging consensus and mobilizing talents to enhance student performance.

According to education researcher Ulrich Reitzug, the principal should be "asking questions and suggesting a variety of alternatives that expand conceptions of how organizational tasks might be accomplished, rather than telling organizational members how these tasks must be accomplished. ...The principal's role shifts from prescribing substance to facilitating processes in which substance can be discovered."

This does not mean the principal does not lead, or is not responsible for carrying out certain tasks, but the new principal knows that he or she can control very little. The new principal succeeds only to the extent that he or she empowers teachers and students to succeed.

The new principal has a tight grip on reality

In what other ways is the new principal new? The new principal has a tight grip on the reality that faces students when they graduate from high school. Middle school principals worry about the futures of their students just as much as do high school principals. They know that among high school graduates in the 1970s who did not go on to college but looked for jobs, 16 percent were still unemployed in October after they graduated in May. The new principal knows that the proportion of graduates who could not find work immediately after high school increased to 24 percent in 1993.

The new principal understands that the nation's economy is producing two million new jobs a year but that those jobs typically come with wages below $16,000 a year, and, according to the *New York Times*, "without health benefits, much opportunity for promotion or promises that the jobs will last." But what about students who pursue post-secondary education? In 1991 the earnings advantage of people having attained only some college was 32 percent greater than those with only a high school diploma. The income of

college graduates was more than double that of people with only some college education.

Over these data, the new principal lays an understanding of the world students will enter as young adults. The economist Peter Drucker believes we are now in a period of transition, from an age of capitalism and the nation-state to an age of knowledge and organization. In the emerging new age, Drucker believes, "Most, if not all, educated persons will practice their knowledge as members of an organization. The educated person will therefore have to be prepared to live and work simultaneously in two cultures—that of the 'intellectual,' who focuses on words and ideas, and that of the 'manager,' who focuses on people and work."

Drucker's analysis is not a vision of the distant future; it describes the world today's middle school students will enter. The human resources director of the Bic Corporation was recently quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* as saying that the qualities she seeks, even in entry-level employees, are "smarts, speed, flexibility, the ability to handle risk and ambiguity, knowing how to find out what you don't know and how to teach others what you do know."

Unlike many principals who shrug off telling labor statistics or sobering predictions, the new middle school principal knows that, tragically, these data and analyses paint a frightening but realistic picture of what the future will be like for many students. Those who the school does not encourage and prepare to pursue some education after high school may find themselves among the 47 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds earning less than the poverty wage even though they work full time. While even college graduates' real wages have fallen in recent years, it is still true that the more education young people have the better off they are likely to be. This is particularly true for racial and language minorities and those from low-income families.

If middle school principals do not understand these trends and what they mean for the young people in their schools, they cannot

become "new principals." If they say they believe and understand these trends but continue to lead schools that are boring, uninspiring, and passive, their schools are merely factories, producing the raw material for what Secretary of Labor Robert Reich describes as "a society divided between the haves and have-nots or the well-educated and the poorly educated."

For the new principal, high performance always comes first

The new principal organizes and leads the middle school so all young people are able to perform at the highest levels possible. For the new principal, this is the greatest commandment. The administrative and operational dimensions of the principalship are very important, but they are secondary to the task of creating a school where the emphasis is on academic performance. The new principal does not apologize for this priority and does not merely rely on words or admonitions to focus faculty, students, and parents on increasing student achievement as the primary mission of the school. Action is the key.

The new principal knows that how the school looks and "feels" communicates a great deal about its mission. Everything about the school directs students toward high levels of performance and achievement beyond high school. By the door of each teacher's classroom is a name plate that lists the teacher's name, grade, subject, the name of the college from which the teacher graduated, the city in which the college is located, and the degree the teacher earned at the college.

Teachers are often seen wearing sweatshirts from their colleges. Once a month in the hallway by the office, representatives from different post-secondary education institutions sit at tables, informally providing students with materials and information as they enter and leave school, and then going into classes to make presentations to students or counsel them. Monthly, students write at least one essay about some aspect of a post-secondary education

institution. The walls of the school are covered with students' themes, science and history projects, and math homework.

Just by walking down the halls, students know that the school is serious about achievement, and that their work really counts. They also know it because four times a year the new principal invites five business people from the community to come to the school, randomly select ten students across all grade levels, and spend several hours examining the students' portfolios, discussing them with the students and counseling them about their futures.

The new principal constantly interacts with the school

The new principal is not hiding in the office nor merely "visible" in classrooms and hallways, but is constantly interacting with adults and students around issues of performance. Students know that every day the principal will randomly stop at least one student entering school, ask to look over the student's homework, and give feedback and a few words of encouragement. Students also know that at the end of every day, the principal will randomly invite one or more students to sit down for a few minutes and discuss the classes where they are doing their best work, those where they are performing least well, and why.

In similar ways, the new principal daily interacts with teachers to provide support and gain insight into classroom and instructional issues that affect student performance. The new principal either teaches one class a day or substitutes for at least 25 class periods a year. On any given day, the principal may volunteer to be a teacher's aide for a full class period, invite a teacher for lunch and informal discussion in the principal's office, or help a teacher grade papers after school.

Significant interactions with the principal are not rare events; they are part of the new principal's routine, intentional acts to communicate to students and faculty that on a daily basis the principal wants to know how students are performing, why they are

performing well or not so well, and how the school can help students perform at higher levels.

The new principal knows that every school year there will be at least several teachers who are teaching at the school for the first time. Whether new to teaching or experienced teachers, they come to the school without an understanding of its history, culture, academic standards, or means of achieving them. The principal organizes a committee of veteran teachers to provide the new teachers with support and mentoring throughout the year.

The new principal frequently meets individually with new teachers, making a special effort to understand each teacher's strengths, limitations, and goals. In this way, the new principal accelerates the teachers' integration with the school's culture, and better understands how to use the teachers to advance the school's emphasis on student performance.

Taking risks is an everyday part of the new principal's job

The new principal understands that, inherently, teaching and learning involve risk. Every day students risk exposing what they do not know, their embarrassment at not knowing it, and their difficulty in learning quickly. Unfortunately, because many schools do not create a culture that encourages and supports academic achievement, students who are serious about achievement may risk the ridicule of their peers.

Teachers also take risks every day. There is an absurd expectation in our culture that managing a classroom is a science that people can learn in teacher training institutions when in fact it is an art that teachers master, if they ever do, through hands-on experience in the classroom. Every day when teachers enter the classroom they take risks. They risk demonstrating that they do not know how to handle every situation, that their mastery of content or methods of effective instruction are not strong, or that they are simply human, people who sometimes get tired, discouraged, or even angry.

The new principal must enter this arena of risk, rather than stand outside it or ignore it. Students and teachers should know that the principal is taking risks to learn and grow. For example, when the principal demonstrates leadership by identifying a difficult problem for which there is no obvious answer and facilitates discussion and debate among teachers and students about possible solutions, this establishes the principal as a fellow risk-taker.

How the new principal acts as a teacher and learner is crucial. The new principal asks probing and difficult questions: What is the evidence that all our students have access to high content and high quality instruction? How can we change our schedule to give low-performing students more time for learning with better teachers? How can we use high-performing students as a resource to assist low-performing students?

The new principal acknowledges, directly or indirectly, that he or she may not know all the answers but is quick to seek answers from others inside and outside the school community. The new principal learns from mistakes and is determined in conceiving and applying alternative solutions to problems. The principal's actions send the message that not knowing is understandable, but not trying to know is unacceptable.

The new principal makes the school safe for learning

It is also the new principal's job to reduce the risk environment in which students learn and faculty teach. The term "reduce the risk environment" means not only assuring freedom from physical harm, but safety in a broader context—teachers feeling safe to express their opinions, safe to take initiative in solving problems, and safe to try, and try again, more effective ways to enhance student performance. It means students feeling safe to question, safe to explore, and safe to achieve.

The new principal establishes a reduced risk environment by developing a collaborative relationship with teachers that fosters

trust and enables the principal and teachers to identify school-based barriers to learning and honestly address them. The principal aggressively assists teachers in getting the high-quality staff development they need to engage students in learning. Always interested in whether staff development results in more effective teaching, the new principal is a frequent classroom visitor and seeks other opportunities to talk with teachers about how they are using their training to increase student performance and what follow-up support they may need to implement the training.

The new principal also develops an environment that is safe for learning by mobilizing teachers and parents to reach consensus on standards for student performance. Learning is at risk when some teachers are moving in one direction while others are moving in another, when parents are uninformed about what their children should be learning, or when students are able to keep teachers and parents isolated from one another, or worse, play them off against one another. The school is not safe for learning if teachers, students, and parents do not understand or agree on what students should know and be able to do.

The new principal keeps the focus on standards

The new principal believes that standards are important benchmarks that can help students advance along a continuum of learning. Standards can focus the teaching and learning process so the force that drives the school is not the state test but clearly defined statements of what students should know and be able to do as a result of their education. Students need to understand what the school expects them to learn and how the school will assess whether they can apply what they have learned. Parents need to understand the results they can expect to see from their children's education. The new principal mobilizes the school community to use content and performance standards for those purposes.

The new principal knows that content standards will have little meaning if the school is not able to assess whether students meet the standards, or are making progress in doing so. While the state-mandated test provides only limited information that is helpful to teachers in understanding what the school's students know and can do, the new principal organizes a committee of teachers to pore over the state test results and, in effect, become the school's experts on how the school's students performed on the test. At the new principal's urging, the committee devotes particular attention to disaggregating the test results and examining the performance of minority students and those from low-income families.

The new principal understands that a large-scale assessment of student performance, such as the state test, is necessary for accountability, yet he or she worries if the school has become so obsessive about the test that teachers and students have lost their perspective of what education and learning are all about. It is the new principal's view that the school has two choices. It can either allow the state test to shape the school's agenda and sap its energy, or it can balance the state test with school-based assessments that more accurately identify and document what students know and can do in a way that teachers, students, and parents find useful.

The new principal takes control of the school's "assessment destiny"

The new principal accepts the legitimacy and value of the state test but believes the school must seize the initiative to creatively use assessment in ways that promote learning. The new principal shares this view with teachers and engages them in considering questions related to school-based assessment. What could the school do to enable teachers, students, and parents to better understand what students know and can do? What steps could the school take to systematically determine not only whether students meet academic standards, but also their growth in performance?

How could the school—not the state or the central office, but the school—seek to gain an accurate understanding of what students know and can do when they enter the sixth grade, what growth in performance occurs each year because of school-based interventions, and the degree to which students meet academic standards at the end of grade eight? In other words, what can the school do to take control of its own assessment destiny?

This is a daunting task, but because the new principal and increasing numbers of the school's teachers are committed to enhancing student performance, they take on the challenge. They believe that if they truly understand what students know and can do, and if students and parents understand it, the entire school community will take student performance more seriously, and the state test will take care of itself.

As a first step, the new principal and teacher leaders mobilize teachers from all grade levels to participate in the assessment of every student who enters the sixth grade. This process begins in March before the school is even sure who will enroll in sixth grade next September. Not all students who participate eventually enroll, but most do and teachers are able to plan for the forthcoming school year with a more realistic view of the students they will be teaching.

The assessment of each student combines discussion between the student and a three-teacher panel (one from each grade level), a short essay, a brief multiple-choice basic skills test, and an exhibition developed by the student. The purpose is to gain insight into each student's level of performance, understand strengths and weaknesses, and determine how the school can best enhance the student's growth during the sixth grade. Each year, a similar process occurs before the student moves on to the next grade, except it also includes an assessment of growth in performance during the preceding year.

Teachers also agree to make greater use of student portfolios, even in math and science, and the principal obtains from the school system and the community resources to enable all teachers to participate in intensive staff development on portfolios. With the new principal's support, a small group of teachers interested in using portfolios to assess student performance seek additional training and thereafter serve as resources to other teachers in the school. These teachers provide mini-staff development experiences for the faculty and periodically review the portfolios of students from other teachers' classes and provide feedback.

Not only does the new principal make sure that all teachers keep honing their skills in using portfolios as an assessment tool, but he or she prods teachers to experiment with other alternative forms of assessment. As a result, teachers increasingly create opportunities for performance events in which students demonstrate and exhibit their knowledge and skills and receive critical feedback from teachers, other students, and even guests from the community.

The new principal integrates standards into school life

Because the school's deepening use of alternative forms of assessment is highly organized and consistent throughout the building, rather than hit-or-miss, the new principal is able to institute two school-community events each year. The first event, held at night during the first month of school, focuses on interpreting to students' families what students will be learning during the school year. Through skits, displays, presentations, and handouts, teachers educate families about the specific content standards the school will prepare students to meet.

The second community event, held over three nights during the last month of school, combines formal programs at the classroom and school-wide levels with scheduled conferences involving families, students, and teachers. This event provides an opportunity for

families to see what students know and can do as a result of their education during the school year. Families examine students' portfolios and discuss them with teachers. Every student makes a brief oral presentation and otherwise demonstrates what he or she learned during the school year.

The halls are lined with exhibits from the science fair in which all students participated, and there are other displays and booklets based on projects students completed during the year. Teachers schedule individual conferences with families to discuss how their children performed in relation to the content standards.

These changes at the school have not come easy. The shift in the school's mission to enabling students to meet high academic standards has occurred only because of the new principal's strong leadership and collaboration with teachers, families, and students. The principal knows that the most important part of his or her job is to focus the school on student performance, increase the expectations and skills of the faculty, and empower teachers to make reforms that will enhance student performance.

The new principal believes in hard work

The new principal has standards. All reforms are not equal and the new principal asks tough questions to determine whether proposed reforms are likely to enable students to perform at high levels. The school begins no new program and launches no new reform without a process for assessing its likely effects, and without making someone accountable for conducting this assessment and reporting the results.

The new principal believes that real reform at the school is necessary if most students are going to meet the academic standards. Unlike many other principals, the new principal constantly engages teachers in conversations about reforms the school needs to make to enhance student performance. The new principal is open to practically any scheme that will produce more time for stu-

dents to learn and more time for teachers to improve their skills, plan, reflect, and assess students' performance as well as their own.

The new principal knows there are no shortcuts to learning: not entertainment to instill motivation, not lower standards to create opportunities for what some people call "success." Instruction, practice, feedback, correction, practice. Instruction, practice, feedback, correction, practice. This is the drumbeat of most formal learning experiences, and while it does not have to be joyless, it is often hard work.

The new principal believes that if low-performing students, or any students, are going to meet high academic standards, it will require more time and effort. Half the battle of enhancing student performance is to intensify students' and teachers' focus on learning. For students to write better, they must write much more frequently and think more critically and deeply about how and what they write. The students' teachers—all teachers, not just English or language arts teachers—have to take the time and make the effort to read what students write, make corrections, and help students understand their errors and how to avoid repeating them.

This is why the new principal is so determined that teaching and learning must be the school's focus, and why the principal acts to protect and expand time for hard-core learning. There are no assumptions about the school organization the principal holds dear, except those that directly advance student learning. No aspect of the school's structure or operations or schedule is so precious that it cannot be changed—yes, even radically reformed—if it will focus teaching and learning, and provide more time for both.

The new principal is both caring and tough

Because the new principal is serious, really serious, about student performance, he or she is not always popular with teachers,

parents, students, or the central office staff. On the other hand, they respect the new principal and cannot argue with the fact that increasing numbers of students are meeting the academic standards. They know the principal cares more about preparing students to meet high academic standards than about maintaining comfortable routines.

Teachers sometimes wish the new principal's personnel reviews were not so thorough and candid, but they know the principal is in their classes enough to have a good understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. At the same time, they see ineffective teachers move on because the new principal carefully documents their deficiencies and insists that they improve. If they do not, the principal does not hesitate to initiate steps leading to the dismissal of those teachers. The school's quality teachers also know that the new principal works hard to recruit outstanding new teachers and frequently fights with the central office when it sends teachers to the school who do not meet the principal's high standards.

This is what it means to become a "new principal." The call is demanding, and the challenges are great. It is understandable that not all principals want to make the effort to become new, and the fact that so few do so is reflected in the performance of many children in our nation's schools. This is one reason school systems are now creating new schools, because many believe it is the only way to get the quality of leadership that students must have to perform at higher levels.

I still believe that principals of regular schools can become new, but it will take a lot of effort. Two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia, "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up." The harvest is students who can perform at the levels of which they are capable, who seek and obtain as much edu-

cation as they can, and who, in a new and different age, can earn enough to keep themselves and their families out of poverty. New principals will reap this harvest if they do not grow weary, if they do not give up.

Raging Intellects

Arguing that schools should stop worrying about young adolescents' "raging hormones" and instead attend to the demands of their "raging intellects," Hayes Mizell explains the premise of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Program for Student Achievement. These remarks were made in June 1995 at a briefing for repre-sentatives of Minneapolis community organizations.

PEOPLE OFTEN ASK me why the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation is interested in middle schools. The answer is that we are concerned about the educational and life futures of 11-to-14-year-olds and how middle schools prepare them for the future. We believe that middle grades represent the last, best hope for influencing the choices young adolescents make and for shaping their understanding of how to develop their talents.

The Foundation is also interested in the education of 11-to-14-year-olds because their education has often been neglected by funders, school systems, and even parents. The truth is that our culture has a hard time dealing with young adolescents. Because they are experiencing an intense period of physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual development, students in the middle grades exhibit unpredictable behaviors that confound many adults. While this developmental period is normal—indeed, it is not possible for children to make the transition to young adulthood without it—adults often react negatively to the behaviors and stresses associated with young adolescence.

Adult interactions with middle school students can be so disconcerting that they give rise to audible sighs, rolling eyes, clenched teeth, and even screams, by adults and students. Indeed, the symptoms of the developmental period we call early adolescence can be so compelling that adults find it hard to see past the behaviors to the needs, feelings, and potential of the young person in formation. This stage of development can be difficult, for both young people and adults, but it is also a time of opportunity.

Many adults expect too little of young adolescents

Young adolescents are seeking to understand who they are and how to relate to the world around them. They are curious and seek new opportunities to test and prove themselves. They are, to use Jeff Howard's term, "learning machines." The issue is what they are learning and how they are learning it.

Unfortunately, many adults (and the education institutions they operate) fail to recognize the strengths of young adolescents and to capitalize on them. Instead, they focus on the sometimes erratic behaviors and risk-taking of middle school students, and spend disproportionate energy and time trying to straight-jacket the symptoms of this normal developmental period. Other adults appear to take a more benign approach, but if you listen carefully to their supposedly light-hearted references to young adolescents as being "wacky" or victims of "raging hormones"—or even, as one leader of the middle school movement put it, "a little brain-dead"—you hear pejorative characterizations that translate into low expectations. These adults regard young adolescents as not only out of control but disabled.

Students in the middle grades are going through a difficult period in their lives, these adults feel, and it is important to support and nurture them, but one should not really expect too much of them academically. This attitude is deeply rooted in many schools serving grades six, seven, and eight, even in middle

schools. I wonder whether this view is unique to schools or whether it mirrors attitudes in the community at large. Do communities pay so little attention to their middle schools, and expect so little of them, because citizens also wish the challenges of young adolescence to silently pass them by? Unfortunately, there is ample evidence that all of us need to pay more attention to middle schools and expect more of them and their students. How should schools and school systems respond?

How can schools serve young adolescents better?

Often, the first step is to implement structures that create smaller, more personalized learning environments for students. Many larger schools subdivide into "houses," units that constitute schools within schools. A house may have its own administrator and its own wing or floor of the school building. Students in one house may interact with students from another house only rarely. Within each house, there may be "teams" of teachers. A team may consist of two or three or four teachers who work together to teach the core academic subjects to a group of approximately 150 students. The team and the students constitute a kind of self-contained family in which students and teachers get to know each other very well. In some cases, the same team of teachers stays with the same students through all three years of middle school.

Teachers in many middle schools have two preparation periods: one to prepare individually for the subject he or she teaches, and one to meet with other teachers on the team to discuss problems of individual students, or to develop interdisciplinary curriculum units. These units help students understand the connections between discrete subjects.

Some middle schools also offer exploratory courses in which students are able to participate in short-term technology, community service, arts, or other projects. Many middle schools also have advisory programs where, for perhaps 20 minutes a day, a teacher

meets with a small group of students to enhance their decision-making and other life skills. These and other structures and programs are hallmarks of middle schools. One team of researchers refers to them as "enabling mechanisms." In fact, many schools define themselves as middle schools by virtue of having put these structures in place. There are still more schools that devote enormous energy and many years to implementing and perfecting these classical components of middle schools.

While many of these characteristics of middle schools are necessary first steps to providing a more effective learning environment for young adolescents, in and of themselves they are not likely to have much effect on student performance. The key variables are whether and how schools intentionally use these structures to increase student learning. I know this from experience and observation. Unfortunately, I am very familiar with a large urban middle school that has a strong principal and most of the common features of a middle school but has been on the brink of being cited by its state for its unimpressive student performance.

Researchers Penny Oldfather and James McLaughlin have also observed that middle school characteristics alone are not sufficient to increase student learning. They write:

Many of the characteristics of middle level education over the last three decades...have been structural changes that were beneficial for students in easing the transition into early adolescence. But regardless of these changes, students' intrinsic motivation—what we refer to as their continuing impulse to learn—is diminished by unresponsive classroom environments, and by conceptions of learning as transmitted, rather than constructed. Innovations such as interdisciplinary unit planning will fail to fulfill their promise without the nurturing of students' voices. And teachers' actions to create an environment that is more responsive to students' interests and experiences—to their lives—cannot be divorced from how teachers and students think about learning.

Oldfather and McLaughlin describe an "honored voice," or "a deep responsiveness in the classroom culture to students' ideas, opinions, feelings, interests and need." They say that "voice comes from our hearts, from our minds, and from the deepest places of knowing and feeling. If learners become connected to their literacy activities in ways that engage all aspects of themselves, they become motivated for literacy learning."

Too few schools honor students' voices

I have seen middle school classrooms where there are "honored voices, a collaborative construction of meaning, and a sense of shared knowing between student and teacher." Yet in any school system, they are too few. There are too many middle schools where neither students nor teachers want to be.

A problem typical of many middle schools is that they fail to strike a balance between supporting and nurturing students, on the one hand, and academically challenging them, on the other. This problem sometimes arises in part in reaction to the junior high school experience, where schools were departmentalized, focused on subject content, and insensitive to the developmental needs of young adolescents. In many middle school circles, "content" is a pejorative term. I believe this results in achievement becoming secondary to the mission of middle schools rather than central to it. This view is illustrated by the following message from a middle school news group on the internet. A middle school teacher named Kathy wrote:

"In California, we are more concerned with students learning concepts and not just being a 'factored' machine. In this information age, facts can be looked up easily. We feel it is more important for students to have an idea of the overall concept so they can be informed citizens of our global community."

It is easy to dismiss Kathy's view as stereotypical Californian, but in fact it is widespread. Writing correctly, reading for under-

standing, using mathematics, and knowing what and where Bosnia is—these are secondary to the greater goal of "an idea of the overall concept." But content and achievement are important, particularly for low-performing students who are the most dependent on high-quality education. If schools only want students to get "an idea of the overall concept" I am not sure why schools are necessary at all. Television and talk radio will suffice.

It's time to quit obsessing about students' weaknesses

At the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, we are focused not on young adolescents' raging hormones but on their raging intellects. We would like to find a few school systems and communities with the courage to abandon the myths associated with the developmental stage known as young adolescence. We believe it is time to structure and staff middle schools so they build on students' strengths rather than obsess about their weaknesses. We have no tidy prescriptions, but our experience to date has led us to some broad approaches. These approaches do not constitute "answers" to vexing problems of low student performance, but they offer direction that may be useful.

Because it is our belief that many middle schools are unclear about their academic mission, we are asking school systems seeking our support to develop standards for what students should know and be able to do by the end of the eighth grade, specifically in math, science, language arts, and social studies. It is our hope that school systems and middle schools will use those standards to mobilize teacher, parent, student, and community support for academic achievement.

On the other hand, we also know that if schools treat standards as they have treated the structures that are characteristic of middle schools, standards can become one more narrow, formulaic tool with little positive effect. Again, the key variable is

whether and how educators use standards to improve teaching and learning.

We are also asking school systems and their middle schools to tell us what proportion of graduating eighth graders they want to meet the standards by June 2001. In other words, we think it is important for the school system and individual middle schools to have a clear academic target they will try to hit. We hope this not only focuses school improvement and teacher professional development, but also encourages school systems to use sensible assessment and techniques that more accurately determine students' progress toward meeting the standards.

We are convinced, however, that students will not perform at higher levels if schools operate and teachers teach the same as they have been. We want to know how teachers will change their practice to enable students to meet the standards. We also want to know how schools will change their structures to provide more time and productive environments for teacher and student learning. There are many things schools could do to enable students to meet standards, and it is up to them to determine what actions will most likely achieve that result. They will, of course, have to convince us that what they propose is a credible strategy for advancing increasing proportions of students toward the standards by June 2001.

We expect school systems and their middle schools to use most of the resources we provide for professional development. That is where the need is, and that is where there is the greatest potential to strengthen teachers' self-efficacy, improve their practice, and raise their expectations for the performance of their students.

Professional development can make a difference

Many teachers in middle schools, particularly those with high proportions of low-performing students, do not believe their students can perform at significantly higher levels. Aside from whatever

assumptions teachers make about their students' abilities because of family background, economic status, race, culture, or language, many teachers do not expect high performance from their students because they do not expect it from themselves. They have lost confidence that they can make a difference in the performance and lives of their students.

It has been our experience that large, consistent doses of intensive, high-quality staff development can increase teachers' self-efficacy and improve their classroom practice. When teachers experience success in learning and applying new skills, they also begin to believe that students can do the same. When teachers raise expectations for their own performance, their expectations for their students' performance go up as well.

Providing more high-quality staff development is also important because there are middle school teachers, particularly in science and math, who are not secure in their knowledge of the content they teach. Some have had only one or two math courses in college or have not seriously pursued in-service educational opportunities that deepen their understanding of their subject. Just as some of the best jazz musicians are those who have had classical training, teachers feel more free to innovate and experiment when they are confident about their mastery of content.

This lack of confidence causes many teachers to cling to the security textbooks provide. When middle school students are asked to describe their classrooms, the word they use most often is "boring." This is not likely to change unless teachers participate in staff development that causes their classroom pedagogy to become more engaging and challenging. Yet improved pedagogy will only result from professional development that is qualitatively different from traditional in-service training.

In many school systems, staff development is disparate, fragmented, and unconnected to teachers' classroom experiences and needs. In fact, it may not even be based on an expectation that

teachers will use what they learn to improve student performance. The staff development may be just as didactic and boring to teachers as their teaching is to students. This will have to change. School systems will have to make more effective use of their resources and provide staff development that models the kind of high content, engaging instruction we want to see in classrooms. Indeed, high-quality staff development, like the responsive classroom, needs to exemplify "honored voice, a collaborative construction of meaning, and a shared sense of knowing between student and teacher." Thankfully, there are models of this kind of professional development, but there is a lot of work to be done to make it standard practice.

These challenges are great, and they are only the tip of the iceberg. Even so, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation believes that school systems, schools, middle school educators, and communities can meet them. I know of no school system that has done so, though individual schools have. The challenge is to move beyond isolated exemplars so that all middle level schools enable students to meet academic standards. This will require a sea change in attitude and practice. Middle schools will have to forge a new vision and mission, one that goes beyond grade configuration or enabling mechanisms or even nurturing and support. All students, particularly low performers, must significantly increase what they know and can do. It is essential that middle schools put the raging intellects of all their students at the center of their purpose.

30 and Counting: Why the Middle School Movement Has Not Reached Its Potential

This review of the 30-year history of the middle grades reform movement includes Hayes Mizell's frank assessment of why middle schools have not yet reached their potential. He presented this talk at a conference for middle grades educators in April 1999, organized by the Southern Regional Education Board.

THIRTY YEARS AGO, the middle school movement began as a reaction to junior high schools that did not adequately take into account the development of young adolescents between the ages of 11 and 14. As the movement picked up steam, more and more local school systems converted from schools with configurations of grades seven through nine, or seven and eight, and adopted schools serving only grades six through eight. School districts apparently embraced middle schools because they believed such schools would provide a better education for young adolescents.

Today, however, throughout the United States, there is deep dissatisfaction with education at the middle level. This stems primarily from the rise during the past fifteen years of state accountability and assessment systems, and the subsequent increase in information about the academic performance of students in grades six, seven, and eight.

More and more people have become aware that academic achievement in the middle grades is unimpressive. Even recent publicity about the improved reading performance of eighth

graders on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is good news only in relative terms. The proportion of eighth grade students scoring at the "proficient" level on NAEP did increase by 4 percent between 1992 and 1998, but even with the increase only 33 percent of students are now scoring at the proficient level.

As a long-time participant in the middle school movement, I would like to share some personal observations about why so many middle schools have failed to achieve their potential, and what must be done to ratchet up the performance of these schools, their staffs, and their students.

Middle schools are not where they should be

The first problem is that most school districts have been very unclear about their purpose in creating middle schools, and equally imprecise about exactly what they want middle schools to accomplish. If you check most school board policies, I suspect you will find no statement of either the purpose of middle schools or the results they should achieve. Instead, you may find some vague language about meeting students' developmental needs or preparing them for high school. Unfortunately, if you talk with most superintendents you will have a similar experience. They will be able to discuss in only the most general terms their expectations and plans for the middle grades. It is unlikely they will have a clear, concrete vision for middle schools or a coherent strategy for how to achieve it. Many school systems converted to middle schools not because the school board and superintendent understood and were committed to the philosophical, educational, and operational reasons for doing so, but because a committee recommended it.

In other words, in most school systems the district leadership does not provide the clear direction and oversight that middle level educators deserve and must have to educate young adolescents

effectively. If the leaders of a school system do not understand the purpose of middle schools and are not committed to providing them the support necessary to carry out that purpose, and if school boards and superintendents do not clearly communicate their expectations for the results middle schools should achieve, it is not just principals and teachers who should be held accountable if their middle schools are adrift.

Second, many middle schools fall short simply because they are not middle schools at all, although they may have some characteristics of middle schools. Even today, 30 years after the origin of the middle school movement, there are schools with grades six, seven, and eight that call themselves "middle schools" but have changed little from the junior high schools of previous generations. Students change classes every 40 to 50 minutes, the faculty is departmentalized, and teachers give priority to presenting subject content rather than engaging students in learning.

Other schools have tried to implement some of the commonly accepted practices of middle schools, but for various reasons they have not implemented them effectively or understood how to use them to improve student performance. For example, many middle schools use "teaming," an approach in which a group of two to four teachers is responsible throughout the school day for the core instruction of about 150 to 175 students. This arrangement is supposed to facilitate collaborative planning among the teachers, promote the development of interdisciplinary curricula, and enable the teachers to work together over time to identify and respond to the strengths and weaknesses of individual students.

However, teaming is not self-actualizing. It requires a great deal of hard work. The personalities and philosophies of the team members have to mesh. They have to be committed to planning lessons jointly and to engaging in deep discussion about how best to meet students' academic and developmental needs. Teaming can work. Many schools use teaming successfully. But teams must be

supported, and they must be regarded as building blocks for increasing student performance.

Third, many middle schools suffer from what we might call a "plateau effect." They work hard to implement the structures and processes associated with middle schools but—whether the implementation is complete or incomplete, of high quality or only half-hearted—they consider their task accomplished once the structures and processes are in place. Again, this occurs because, from the beginning, the schools were unclear about the results they were seeking to achieve. Perhaps they thought that if they were named a middle school, had a middle school grade configuration, and had some of the structures and processes associated with middle schools, they would, in fact, *be* a middle school. This is when schools plateau. They focus on how the "middle school concept is working" rather than on how much better students are learning. These schools move on to other agendas, and eventually the structures and processes they implemented lose their vitality and their positive effects. What was once innovative and promising becomes business as usual, and students know it. That is why so many students characterize their middle schools as "boring."

Fourth, middle schools have not lived up to their potential because neither school systems nor schools have paid attention to the fundamentals. By fundamentals, I mean meeting the academic and developmental needs of students; increasing the expectations, support, and accountability of teachers and administrators; improving students' preparation for and access to challenging academic content; and engaging students in meaningful learning experiences.

Young adolescents have unique needs

The problem of low expectations and lack of support for students is complex. It begins with how schools perceive and treat young adolescents. It is true that these young people are unique. They

enter middle school as they begin to emerge from childhood, and they leave the eighth grade on the threshold of young adulthood. Their journeys through those years occur in dramatically different ways and at significantly different rates. They are challenged by the rip tides of rapid physical, cognitive, psychological, emotional, and social development.

As they seek to understand who they are becoming, and how to negotiate the temptations and opportunities of their culture and our adult world, young adolescents necessarily take risks. In fact, it is only by testing limits that they locate the boundaries of social norms and learn the consequences of crossing them. If many middle school students are difficult to tolerate, it is because their behaviors mirror the intensity of what they have to tolerate at this stage of their lives. Middle school students are, in other words, under normal developmental stress. Unfortunately, there is no way to get from age 10 to age 14 without passing through ages 11, 12, and 13.

Even if educators understand intellectually why young adolescents behave as they do, on an emotional level they find it challenging to respond to the ups and downs of their students. It is not unusual to encounter middle school educators who are so focused on responding to students' developmental challenges, or so determined to straightjacket students' development, that they push student learning to the margins of the students' educational experiences. It is not learning, but sympathy for students or control of students that sets the school's agenda.

You know educators who hold these beliefs and whose practices reflect them. One group believes young adolescents are so vulnerable that about all the school can do is take care of them, not expect too much of them academically, and hope that the students make it through middle school without harming themselves or others. These educators intend to help students but that is not the result. Instead of becoming stronger, students become weaker

because their schools do not provide the quality academic challenges and support students need to grow.

Another group of educators see young adolescents as more volatile than vulnerable. They seek to control students' behaviors by limiting opportunities that foster student interaction, movement, experimentation, discussion, questioning, debating, and even talking. In these schools, it is very difficult for deep learning to occur because the school's priority is on controlling the inquiry and dialogue that foster learning. That is not the intention of the schools, but it is the effect.

There are also many middle school educators who perceive their students quite differently. These teachers and administrators like the energy and unpredictability of young adolescents. They regard these qualities as assets rather than liabilities. They are sensitive to the developmental challenges students face, but they also recognize that their students are earnest young people, desperately seeking to be taken seriously by adults and eager for adults' respect and support. These teachers and administrators know that many students react negatively to schooling because it is often shallow and *not* serious.

We need to expect more of middle grades educators

To have higher expectations of middle school students, we must also have higher expectations of middle school teachers and administrators. Is it too much to expect that these educators should like and understand the age group for which they are responsible? Is it too much to expect that middle school teachers and administrators should be knowledgeable about the most effective ways to engage students in learning? Is it too much to expect that they should be steeped in the content they are teaching and confident that they can help young adolescents learn that content at increasingly more difficult levels? Is it too much to expect that middle school principals should be leading, monitoring, support-

ing, and assessing teachers' performance, not just occasionally but for a significant part of every school day?

These expectations are reasonable, but how can they be brought to fruition? The current preparation of teachers does not guarantee that middle schools will have teachers who are experts in their subject content, or who even understand adolescent development. A recent scholarly article reported that, across grades seven through twelve, students in the seventh and eighth grades are most likely to be taught by teachers without a college major *or* minor in the subjects they are teaching. As many as 75 percent of eighth grade students taking physical science are taught by teachers without a major or minor in this field. In mathematics, 48 percent of seventh grade students are taught by teachers without a major or minor in this field.

It is interesting that the author of the article attributes the responsibility for this problem primarily to how school systems and principals actually employ and assign teachers, in spite of state laws or regulations. The fact that "misassignment is an accepted administrative technique" is the problem, the author says, and he goes on to point out:

> Good teaching entails a complex combination of art, craft, and science that the best contemporary research has begun to insightfully illuminate. It requires expertise in at least three areas: knowledge of the subject (knowing what to teach), skill in teaching (knowing how to teach) and (what a leading researcher on teaching has called) pedagogical content knowledge–knowing which method to use with particular topics, with particular kinds of students, and in particular kinds of settings. In short, the managerial choice to misassign teachers may save time and money for the school and, ultimately, for the taxpayer, but it is not cost-free.

Middle schools provide abundant evidence that the cost is undereducated students who are unable to perform at the higher levels states are demanding of them.

Everyone must be accountable for higher standards

This brings me to the issue of academic standards. Nearly all states have promulgated standards of some type. When these standards delineate what students should know and be able to do by the end of their middle school education, and when there are reasonable benchmarks of proficiency to determine whether students can, in fact, perform at standard, academic standards perform a useful function. Indeed, one of the problems in middle school education has been that neither teachers, nor students, nor parents have been clear on what students should know and be able to do as a result of their learning experiences in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.

However, if states or school systems believe that standards, in combination with high stakes assessments of student performance, will in and of themselves increase student learning, not just increase test scores, they are sadly mistaken. Students bear more than a little responsibility for their academic performance, but they should not bear all the responsibility. When students do not perform at standard, it is not appropriate to retain students in grade if there are not also comparable consequences for middle school teachers and principals.

In standards-based reform, the maxim is that *everyone* has to work harder, *everyone* has to be supported at high levels, *everyone* has to perform better, and *everyone* has to be held accountable. Whether states and school systems have the intestinal fortitude to do that is another matter—but if standards and assessment are to have any significant across-the-board impact, accountability is essential.

Better staff development is crucial

The only way middle school students, teachers, and administrators will perform better is if they all get a great deal more support than is now the case. Today, "professional development" exists in every state and every school system, but it tends to be diffuse and of very low quality, and there is virtually no meaningful evaluation of its results. Rarely does it engage teachers and principals in developing the knowledge and skills they need to cause students to perform at standard. In fact, most staff development is held in such low esteem by practitioners that they seek to avoid it.

I should mention that, under a grant from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the National Staff Development Council has identified 26 subject-specific middle school staff development programs for which there is evidence of increased student achievement. The Council had to study more than 400 programs to find them.

It may be tempting, based on the generally poor results achieved to date, to dismiss staff development as a key strategy for improving the performance of middle school educators. It would be a mistake to do so. Professional development has the potential to be an important tool for reform. First, however, staff development itself must be reformed so that it provides current teachers and principals with the support they need to improve their practice.

The first step in this reform process is to abandon staff development practices that waste precious time and money while alienating the very educators they should be helping. These practices include discrete, "one-shot" workshops that may increase "awareness" but are not deep or engaging enough to enable educators to develop new knowledge and skills they can apply with confidence to their teaching or leadership. Instead, all staff development needs to be explicitly focused on helping middle school educators develop the three kinds of expertise I referred to earlier: knowledge of the subject, skill in teaching, and "pedagogical content

knowledge –knowing which method to use with particular topics, with particular kinds of students, and in particular kinds of settings." In light of the appallingly high percentage of middle school students taught by teachers without a college major or minor in the field in which they are teaching, there is no time to waste in making better use of currently available staff development resources.

It's time to move to the next phase

If the creation and development of middle schools was a first phase in reforming the education of young adolescents, it is now time to move into a second phase. One of the problems with the first phase was that many educators thought that merely creating middle schools would result in what they vaguely described as "more successful" students. With the benefit of hindsight, we now understand that the first phase of middle school reform placed too much emphasis on school structures and processes, as well as on the affective dimension of education. In the second phase of middle school reform it is necessary to emphasize increasing the knowledge and skills of principals and teachers, strengthening curriculum, and significantly increasing what all students know and can do.

The state of the art of school reform is much more sophisticated now than it was 30 years ago. There are now designs for whole school reform–in effect, blueprints for how to reform an entire school systematically. These designs are not magic. They require money, hard work, and consistent, high-quality staff development over time. An advantage of employing such a design is that a school does not have to conceive its reform from scratch, or subsequently figure out how to get from one point to another on the reform continuum. Instead, it can draw on the expertise and experience of the team of national researchers who created the design and have assisted other schools in implementing it. The use of the

most promising of these designs can potentially accelerate the second phase of middle school reform so we begin to see higher levels of student performance sooner rather than later.

Finally, we need to keep in mind that the focus of the second phase must not be "middle school improvement" but "improving middle schools' results." During the past three decades, there has been a lot of loose talk about middle schools being "student-centered." If this had truly been the case, we would not be meeting here today. If middle schools had truly been student-centered, they would be able to point to more impressive evidence of student performance. In fact, most middle schools have been more adult-centered than anything else. It is, after all, the adults in the schools who have been the most resistant to change and who have been inclined to expect too little of themselves and their students. In the second phase of middle school reform, the emphasis must be on expecting, demanding, and strongly supporting adult performance that causes higher levels of student performance.

Six Steps to an Achieving Middle School

What is an achieving middle school? Hayes Mizell outlines the characteristics of a middle school that is truly focused on student achievement and describes six challenging steps toward creating one. He made these remarks to a group of middle school teachers and administrators from Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, in June 1999.

HOW DID IT COME TO THIS? Why did elementary and secondary educators default in their stewardship of student achievement? What happened to cause the public to believe that politicians, business leaders, and newspaper reporters care more about student achievement than do teachers and principals? How did it come to pass that standardized test results generate more apprehension among public school educators than among students and parents?

If there are answers to these questions, they are debatable and complex. Some people would say it all began with the 1983 report, *A Nation At Risk.* Others would say, and have, that the report was a political document based on an incorrect analysis of student achievement data. People could, in turn, rebut that assertion by citing recent data from state assessments, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, that document lagging student performance.

Our purpose today is not to engage in one more defensive discussion about whether schools need to increase levels of student achievement. I assume you are here because you are professionals who recognize that many students are not performing up to their

academic potential, or because you are under pressure from your school system and state to demonstrate that you can increase levels of student performance in your classrooms and schools.

An achieving middle school takes lots of hard work

Whatever your motivation, it is right and good that you are thinking about how to carry your middle schools to higher levels. In fact, it is more than right and good, it is essential, because you are the only people who can take the actions necessary to increase student achievement. Let me say it again. *You are the only people who can take the actions necessary to increase student achievement.*

Yes, parents are their children's "first teachers," and they can and should foster their children's achievement, but they do not have your training or experience. Yes, communities can and should provide young people the diverse developmental opportunities they need to build self-confidence and the desire to achieve, but community support is no substitute for what should be the schools' academic focus. If you cannot help your students achieve at higher levels, who can?

I know your work is complicated by great obstacles. Classes are too big. Too many job requirements have too little to do with teaching and learning. Too many students seem to have everything on their minds but learning. Some of your colleagues are unwilling to invest the time and effort it takes to develop and apply the new attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and skills necessary to increase student achievement. These and other obstacles are daunting, and you know better than I that it is not easy to overcome them. It takes steady, hard work. That is what you tell your students it takes to achieve, and it applies to you as well.

We live in a culture that values convenience, short-cuts, expediency, and painless learning. Teachers and principals are not immune from the influences of that culture. They look for the program, textbook, curriculum, or technique that will make their

jobs easier. Indeed, there are a lot of resources in the education marketplace, and some of them are helpful, but if educators use them properly, nearly all those resources require more rather than less work. There are no shortcuts to increase student achievement. Raising the performance levels of your students means that you as individual professionals and your schools as institutions have to also perform at higher levels, and that takes will and effort.

Let us assume that everyone here wants to increase student achievement, and that each of you has the will and is prepared to exert the effort it takes to reach that goal. How do you go about it? I cannot prescribe what I would call an IRP—an Individual Reform Plan—for each of you, but I would like to share some thoughts about steps you can take to turn your schools into achieving middle schools.

What is an achieving middle school?

What do I mean by "achieving middle school?" It is a school whose mission, ethos, culture, structure, organization, curriculum, co-curriculum, and instruction are explicitly dedicated to the achievement of every student and every adult in the building. It is a school where from the time a visitor walks in the front door there is no doubt that the school's focus is on advancing the achievement of every student and every adult. It is not a school where the administrators and teachers assume that they know all they need to know and that their work is limited to imparting their knowledge to students. In the achieving middle school, the administrators, teachers, and students understand that they all have something to teach and a lot to learn. This belief is stated and restated. It is a fundamental operating principle of the school.

I want to outline six steps toward becoming an achieving middle school. But let me say right up front that I am not going to include some "basics" in these steps. For example, I am not going to say that everyone in your schools, from principals to school sec-

retaries to teachers to food service and custodial staff must come to school each day prepared to care about every student they encounter. You cannot have an achieving middle school unless it is an authentically caring middle school.

I am not going to say that your schools have to be safe, free not only of violence, harassment, and intimidation among students but between teachers and students. No school can be an achieving middle school unless both students and staff feel safe. But there is another kind of safety that is often overlooked and is just as basic. Middle schools have to be safe for students and adults to express their opinions, disagree, and even debate. Students and adults have to know they will be heard and that constructive dialogue will be practiced and honored.

I am not going to say that everyone in your schools, from administrators to teachers to classified staff to students, has to demonstrate respect for one another. No school can be an achieving middle school unless every person practices mutual respect every day.

I am not going to say that your school has to be more dedicated to students who are low performing, socially alienated, or otherwise at the margins than to other students. No school can be an achieving middle school unless it allocates more talent, effort, and other resources to the students most in need.

I am not going to include any of these practices in the steps its takes to become an achieving middle school because all of them are fundamental. If there is anyone here who does not know that caring, respect, safety, and disproportionate attention to those with the greatest needs are basic to an achieving middle school, there is nothing I can say that will help you. No matter what other steps you may take, if you ignore these basics you will never have achieving middle schools. Now let us consider the six steps.

Step 1: Make achievement the primary purpose

Forge a consensus among all the adults in the school that advancing achievement is the school's primary purpose.

This step may be obvious, but it is surprising how many schools are not really clear about their overarching purpose. Those schools typically have a long list of priorities, even though it should be clear that not everything can be a priority. It simply is not possible to give equal attention to every issue or concern. Some things are more important than others, and the most important of all is student achievement. If the adults in the school do not agree on that, then it will be difficult, if not impossible, for the school to become an achieving middle school.

Of course, it is not easy to get agreement that the school's primary purpose is to advance achievement. There are teachers who, as one principal said, "consider themselves to be the last independent contractors." In other words, they believe that once they have been hired by the school system, it is their right to do what they want in the way they want to do it. When administrators and other teachers in the school allow this attitude to prevail, there can be no achieving middle school.

At one low-performing school I visited, I learned that some teachers act as though participating in faculty meetings is an optional activity; sometimes they participate, sometimes they do not. While it is essential for faculty meetings to be well-organized and substantive—many schools now use these meetings for staff development—it speaks volumes when teachers believe they can build a firewall between what they do and the welfare of the school. This is why, in so many middle schools, one or two teams may be very good but many more are mediocre or worse.

In the achieving middle school, teachers cannot do their own thing and principals cannot hide in their offices or devote themselves almost exclusively to administrative tasks. Instead, there must be visible manifestations of trust, give-and-take, extra effort,

community, and mutual accountability among adults, all focused on improving the performance levels of both students and adults. Unless there is agreement that this is the school's central focus, and unless administrators, teachers, and classified personnel work together, there can be no achieving school.

Step 2: Identify everyone's talents and interests

Systematically identify and use the talents, abilities, and interests of all adults and students in the school, as well as students' families.

Most of us experience school as a place where there is an underlying assumption that students do not know certain things and it is the school's responsibility to help them learn those things. This is a deficit approach to education, where the emphasis is on what students do not know and cannot do rather than on what they do know and can do. In schools where students come from low-income families, or speak little or no English, or are from an ethnic or racial group different from the majority of teachers in the school, it is not unusual for these factors to influence educators' assumptions about what students know and can do and their academic potential.

The achieving middle school acknowledges this reality and seeks to compensate for it by systematically developing an inventory of the talents, abilities, and interests of each student and adult in the school. The purpose of this process is twofold: it makes concrete the school's belief that every person in the school is valued and has something to contribute, and it provides the school's administrators and teachers with a complete list of the human resources available to advance the achievement of individuals within the school community.

The process of developing this inventory could commence with the new school year by focusing on the class of rising sixth graders

and the school's staff. It could then be repeated with each successive class of sixth graders, as well as updated for each class as it progresses through grades seven and eight. The task of developing the inventory and the database of talents, abilities, and interests could probably best be organized and carried out under the leadership of a small committee of school staff, students, and representatives of students' families.

It is important to understand that the use of the inventory would not be to identify people to perform support functions unrelated to increasing achievement. The purpose is not to find people who will bake more and better cookies, or answer the telephone in the school office, or accompany students on field trips, but to uncover and put to work the human resources that otherwise go unidentified, unacknowledged, and unused in every school.

Even though people would have to volunteer to participate in the inventory and share their talents with others, I am confident that most people would welcome the opportunity. Consider the possibilities: Students who speak a language that teachers and other students do not speak could provide basic, practical instruction in that language. Teachers, regardless of the subjects they teach, who like youth literature could organize and facilitate book discussion groups with students. Students who are computer whizzes could help teachers improve their technology skills. School staff who have hobbies such as chess or gardening or photography could help students develop those skills.

Each of these teaching and learning experiences might occur on a small scale, between individuals or in small groups, but the objective would be a school community in which everyone, not just students, is seeking to achieve a new proficiency. If those activities were sustained and pervasive, they could develop a powerful climate of achievement.

Step 3: Use standards to define learning goals

Embrace and use content and performance standards to clearly delineate student learning goals, and engage teachers, students, and families in understanding what those standards mean.

If your school system and schools want middle school students to achieve at higher levels, students need to know what you expect them to achieve, and the level of proficiency they must demonstrate as evidence that they have achieved it. In the past, and perhaps in too many classrooms today, the curriculum has been the textbook, even though schools did not really expect that students would learn everything in the textbook.

Instead, the schools played a guessing game with students, saying, in effect, "Here is this book; we will cover what we can, and we think it is really important for you to learn some of what is in the textbook. We will not tell you what it is we expect you to learn, but at different points during the school year we will give you a test to determine if you have learned it. If you study what is in this textbook and if you are very good at guessing what we think you should learn, you will perform well on the tests." This, of course, is not a process that fosters either good teaching or significant learning.

If schools really understand standards and use them effectively, standards can be a pathway to more effective teaching and deeper learning. Standards should result from asking the question, "What should students know and be able to do as a result of their educational experiences?" The challenge is to establish standards that answer that question in a concrete and limited way. The standards should not include more than teachers can address or students can learn, but should be restricted to what is most important for students to know and be able to do.

When standards meet this criterion, they can be a constructive force for better teaching and deeper student learning. The focus becomes what students should learn, and what and how teachers

should teach to cause students to perform at standard. If a student does not meet standards, the responsibility is shared equally by the student, the teacher, and the school. The student has to make greater effort. The teacher has to change his or her instruction. The school has to provide the student more time for learning, perhaps different learning contexts, and certainly additional opportunities to demonstrate that he or she can perform at standard.

The purpose of standards is not to penalize students but for teachers and schools to take whatever actions are necessary to cause students to meet the standards.

Step 4: Focus staff development on student achievement

Reform staff development so it is rooted in what teachers and administrators need to know and be able to do to increase student achievement, and evaluate the results of staff development.

If student achievement is going to increase, teachers and administrators will have to make it happen. But they cannot increase student achievement unless they have and apply the attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and skills that are correlates of increased student achievement. We know that if for whatever reasons teachers believe that students cannot achieve much, the result will be that the students do not achieve much.

We know that if teachers are not deeply knowledgeable about the subjects they teach, and if they do not manifest a contagious excitement about those subjects, students will not believe those subjects are important and they will not devote much effort to learning them. We know that if the principal does not focus the faculty on high-quality instruction and student work, and consistently monitor and seek to improve teachers' instruction, then significant increases in student achievement will not occur.

Even though we know all this, most school systems and schools do not effectively use the greatest resource available to

them—staff development—to increase the performance levels of teachers and administrators. Most staff development is not carefully conceived to help teachers and administrators develop and use the specific skills they need to increase student achievement. Even worse, staff development is almost never rigorously evaluated to determine what educators learned or how effectively they applied what they learned to their classrooms and schools. Few school systems and schools invest enough in staff development, but most do not really know what their total expenditures are because staff development activities are diffuse, spread across many different functions and programs.

In the achieving middle school, however, the principal and the school leadership team treat staff development as a precious resource. They carefully analyze the school's budget and its activities to identify both money and time for staff development. They also identify staff development that is required by other entities such as the central office of the school system or the state department of education.

With this information as background, the leaders of the achieving middle school then use student performance data to identify students' and teachers' greatest learning needs. If, for example, the math performance of students is not what it should be, the school's leadership team engages mathematics teachers and the central office's math consultant in creating staff development that will most likely increase teachers' effectiveness in raising student achievement. The school does not stop there, however. It also implements a process for determining whether and how teachers benefit from the staff development, and whether and with what effect they adapt their instruction to use what they learned.

This process of evaluation helps the school learn from the professional development experiences of its staff, and over time increases the school's understanding of what types of staff development are most effective.

Step 5: Engage everyone in discussion of student work

Collectively engage teachers, administrators, site councils, and students' families in analyzing and discussing the quality of student work.

How does a school know whether students are achieving? How does it know that the rate at which they are achieving is satisfactory? Sadly, most schools are dependent on the results of standardized assessments to gauge the academic progress their students are making. In one sense, these schools have turned over accountability for monitoring student progress to either the state or the central office of their school system.

Given the high-stakes nature of these assessments, it is not surprising that schools are so dependent on them for information about student progress, but this is not healthy for schools or their students. The tests serve a purpose, but at best they are snapshots of what students know and can do; they do not provide schools with a sophisticated, comprehensive understanding of students' levels of performance or academic growth.

While the achieving middle school disaggregates and studies the results of standardized assessments to learn what to change about curriculum and instruction, it does not stop there. The achieving school also engages teachers and administrators, and as many representatives of students' families as possible, in systematically examining student work over time. This usually occurs in small groups, such as department or team meetings, but faculty meetings and special evening programs are also appropriate venues. At these meetings teachers bring samples of actual student work to analyze and discuss.

This works best in schools where teachers are committed to using rubrics that describe varying levels of the quality of student work, from excellent to poor, for a specific assignment. Rubrics can also help teachers engage students in understanding the quality of work the teachers are seeking. Some teachers involve their stu-

dents in developing the rubric for a particular assignment, while others collaborate with students to develop a generic rubric for all work students produce. In other words, rubrics can help students understand teachers' expectations and the criteria teachers use to assign grades to the work students submit.

There are a number of different protocols for how a group of people might examine student work, but at one middle school it goes like this: Once a week the social studies teachers meet after school for two hours to examine and discuss student work. A teacher brings to the group a selection of work students completed in response to a major assignment. The teacher begins the session by explaining the content standard for the assignment addressed. She goes on to explain why and how she developed the assignment—in other words, how she intended the assignment to help students develop the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the specific content standard. The teacher then describes the rubric she developed to assess the quality of the students' work. Finally, the teacher discusses several pieces of student work which are illustrative of the range of students' performance on the assignment.

At that point, the teacher's colleagues ask questions and provide feedback. They may praise the link between the specific content standard and the assignment. They may make suggestions for strengthening the assignment, or critique certain elements of the rubric. But this process is not a show-and-tell for the teacher to proudly show off the best work of her class. Instead, it is an opportunity for a group of professionals to think hard about and discuss the relationship between their instruction and the performance of their students. This cannot occur unless each teacher is willing to learn from his or her colleagues, and unless there is enough trust and security among the teachers that they can give and take constructive criticism.

The objective of the collaborative examination of student work is to improve teacher practice so it will improve student performance. This can be one of the most effective types of staff development, but like other potentially powerful investments in education it requires sustained commitment and effort.

Examining student work is important because the bottom line in the achieving middle school is what students actually know and can do, not just how they perform on tests. In fact, student performance is a higher standard than test performance. As adults, we do not earn our livings by performing well on tests but by demonstrating every day what we know and can do.

Student work is the window that enables us to understand what students actually know and can do, but it is only one component of the framework for increasing student achievement. That framework includes these elements: there must be challenging and engaging curriculum that is standards-based; the instruction of teachers must be rooted in their knowledge of the content they are teaching and their skillful use of pedagogy to engage students in learning that content; teachers must develop high-quality assignments for the specific purpose of causing students to progress toward performing at standard; and teachers must collaboratively and consistently analyze student work to determine if their instruction and assignments are producing the quality of work students must demonstrate to perform at standard. If not, then teachers must change their practice to achieve this result. Only when all these pieces are in place, consistently and faithfully implemented, will student performance increase significantly.

Step 6: Make high school success a primary goal

Focus the school on encouraging and preparing nearly all students in grades six, seven, and eight to enroll and succeed in high school courses leading to post-secondary education.

There is a statement that one often hears in discussions about the purpose of education: "Well, you know, not everyone needs to go to college or should go to college. It is quite possible to make a good living and be happy without going to college." This is usually followed by an anecdote about a relative who did not go to college but has a good job and is making more money than another relative who did go to college.

It is, of course, true that there are some highly motivated, strong willed, energetic, and creative people who have only a high school education and are successful in spite of it. It is also true that in the next millennium there will be fewer and fewer jobs for such people.

I ask you, in light of that fact, why would a middle school not intentionally encourage and prepare nearly every sixth, seventh, and eighth grader to enroll and succeed in high school courses leading to post-secondary education? If middle schools really want the best for their students, if they really want to prepare them for the twenty-first century, why are they not encouraging and preparing nearly every middle school student to seek and obtain as much education as possible? I believe this is what an achieving middle school must do.

I want to point out that when I use the term "post-secondary education" I mean any level of education beyond high school, not just four years of college. "Post-secondary" should include technical education, two-year college, or any structured educational opportunity that requires a high school diploma and has other entrance criteria. The same type of post-secondary education is not appropriate for everyone, but it is both appropriate and necessary to encourage and prepare nearly all middle school students for some type of post-secondary education.

This does not mean that a middle school has any business deciding or even suggesting a specific type of post-secondary education for a particular student. It certainly does not mean that the

school should assign students to classes based on what the school believes or assumes is the best preparation for a specific type of post-secondary education for a particular student. This is not the role of the achieving middle school.

Instead, the school educates all students about all the many different types of post-secondary education available to them. The school does not make judgments that some students are not smart enough or come from families with too little money to pursue higher education. Rather, the school instills in all students the desire to seek additional education after high school. The achieving middle school seeds and nurtures students' interest in post-secondary education. It understands that student aspiration precedes student determination, and that in all matters the "what" must come before the "how."

But encouraging students to pursue higher education requires much more than handing out brochures, or pairing students with mentors, or even creating opportunities for students to spend time at post-secondary institutions. Students have to develop confidence that, with effort, they can perform at higher levels. This begins with middle school teachers and administrators consistently communicating their belief that higher education is a desirable goal for students, and each day driving home their expectation that students will produce quality work in middle school.

This, of course, presents a problem. Many middle school teachers and administrators do not believe that nearly all students can or should prepare for post-secondary education, and they do not expect them to produce high-quality work in middle school. In these cases, the attitudes and behaviors of the educators communicate so powerfully that anything else they may do has little effect. Middle school students are very discerning about how much their teachers care about and expect of them, and how well teachers prepare and how hard they work to help students develop academically. Therefore, it is essential for middle school educators to get

their attitudes and behaviors straight before they set out to encourage and prepare nearly all middle school students to pursue post-secondary education.

Tackling this issue has other profound consequences for schools. To honestly prepare students to take high school courses leading to post-secondary education, schools will need to eliminate low-level courses and ensure that nearly all students participate in challenging, high content courses that are aligned with high school courses. I know what you are thinking: How is this possible when so many students come to middle school with poor literacy and math skills? Of course it is not possible if your middle schools are structured and operated as they are now. That is the point. No school can become an achieving middle school by merely tinkering here or tweaking there, making just a few changes at the margins and hoping for the best.

If middle schools are to advance significantly the achievement of all students, schools will have to restructure, retool, and reallocate. More teachers will have to invest more time and effort in developing mastery of the content they teach and becoming more skillful in causing students to perform at standard. The curriculum will have to become more engaging and challenging. The school day and week, and perhaps even the school year, will have to change to create more time for high-quality staff development and much more time for student learning. Above all, attitudes will have to change. Educators have to believe that they can reform their schools fundamentally, and central office leaders to whom they are accountable have to believe it also. Unless teachers and principals believe that middle school reform is both necessary and possible, and unless they have both the permission and the support of central office leaders, it will not be possible for middle schools to become achieving schools.

One more step: Believe in yourselves and your students

These, then, are the six steps to develop an achieving middle school. At best, they represent a framework, not a recipe. Because each middle school is different, each will have to take the six steps in its own way. This is not a process for the timid, and I encourage you to be courageous and bold. Though I know the challenge is great, it is not as great as the challenges that will confront your students if you do not take these steps.

During the next millennium, they will face an increasingly complex and competitive world. Some of you may be tempted to shrug your shoulders and say, "It does not make any difference what I do. Whatever I do, some of my students will succeed, some will not." Yes, that is the human condition, but are you really so powerless that you cannot change lives? Are you really saying that you cannot make a significant difference in how your students prepare for the future?

I do not believe that, and I hope you do not. But what is more important is what your students believe. Each day they take a leap of faith. They come to school believing that you have their best interests at heart and that, no matter what, you will help them prepare for the future.

Your students almost never tell you that. Some act as though they believe just the opposite, throwing your best efforts back in your face. But the truth is that even those students believe in you and are counting on you. I will bet that some of you know that this is true because once, many years ago, you were such students. In spite of your behavior or apparent lack of motivation, some teacher convinced you that you could achieve.

So do not ever believe that you and your schools cannot make a profound difference in the lives of all your students. The challenge is to reform your schools and your teaching so that all students, not just some students, achieve at significantly higher levels.

Middle School Reform: Where Are We Now?

Middle level education may be firmly established, Hayes Mizell explains, yet there is "disquiet in the middle school community." Speaking to a gathering of middle school educators from Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana in March 2000, Mizell laid out several difficult but necessary steps that educators must take to improve the performance of middle school students.

BY SOME MEASURES, we can judge the middle school movement a success. Among adults who work with young people, there exists a widely shared philosophy about the needs of young adolescents and how best to meet those needs. To educate young people between the ages of 11 and 15, there are now at least 12,000 schools, more than half with sixth to eighth grade configurations. Conversely, during the past 30 years, there has been a dramatic decline in junior high schools with seventh to ninth grade configurations.

To lead and teach middle school youth, tens of thousands of principals and teachers hold special credentials, as mandated by state law or regulation. Thirty-five states require some kind of specific preparation to teach in middle schools, and hundreds of institutions of higher education train prospective teachers and administrators so they can qualify to seek employment at the middle level. In addition, countless entities–including textbook and magazine publishers, professional organizations, independent consultants, and nonprofit organizations–develop and provide

goods, services, and programs targeted to the schools, teachers and administrators, and families of young adolescents.

There is disquiet in the middle school community

There is no question that middle level education is now firmly established as an important link in the chain of young people's educational experiences. Yet there is disquiet in the middle school community. Owing largely to the visibility that state accountability and assessment systems have given to performance on standardized tests, serious questions have arisen about students' achievement levels and the capacity of middle schools to challenge students academically. Many school board members and superintendents still have little or no practical understanding of the purpose of middle schools, or the levels of supervision and support necessary for middle schools to operate effectively. With this leadership deficit, it is no surprise that many middle schools are virtually ignored by their school systems while others are essentially middle schools in name only.

Too many middle level teachers continue to buy into the myth that young adolescents are so distracted by their social, emotional, physical, and psychological development that they have no interest in learning, and that there is no point in challenging them. This view alone is dangerous, but it is even more pernicious when it is part of a belief system that middle school students cannot perform at higher levels because of their race, language, culture, or family income or background. There are also too many middle school teachers who lack the necessary subject matter knowledge necessary to engage students in higher levels of learning and who demonstrate little interest in their own professional development to acquire the knowledge and skills they need.

Finally, many families regard middle schools as unfocused, dangerous places where their children are not safe from physical violence, disrespect, bullying, and the myriad manifestations of a

risk-taking peer culture. This is one reason why in some communities there is growing interest in abandoning middle schools that include grades six through eight and replacing them with schools that include kindergarten through grade eight. Families are increasingly afraid of losing their connections with their young adolescent children, and they believe an elementary school environment will be more protective, nurturing, and conducive to maintaining positive family relationships.

There is, then, a rising tide of doubt about the viability and effectiveness of middle schools. Some of these concerns are due to ignorance. Some show that people are genuinely troubled by how some middle schools operate and the poor results they achieve. It would be a mistake for middle school educators and advocates to dismiss these concerns or attempt to characterize them as ill-founded. Assuming a defensive posture is not the way to improve middle school education or increase the credibility of middle schools. Improvements will occur only when leaders at all levels identify and acknowledge the real problems of middle schools and take actions that result in solving the problems.

Educators are acknowledging the need for reform

There is evidence that educators are beginning to acknowledge the need for change. Increasingly, we find educators focusing on the issue of "middle school reform" and feeling comfortable with that term and that goal. There is less nervousness about embracing the task. Fewer people suggest that the term "reform" is a self-indictment or an admission that previous educational practices were not effective. More people recognize that, although the terms "middle school transformation" or even "middle school improvement" may be less threatening, they also do not communicate the urgency or the truth of what is required–literally re-forming middle schools so they serve students more effectively.

Middle school reform is not about a few changes at the margins. It is about putting students first and the prerogatives and convenience of adults second, changing how the school functions and how students are taught so they learn more and become partners in developing and sustaining a caring school community.

The creation of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, a group of approximately 60 practitioners, representatives of national education organizations, researchers, advocates, and foundation officials, is therefore an encouraging development. Remarkably, this diverse group of leaders agrees that middle school reform is necessary. They even agree on a vision and criteria for what constitutes a high-performing middle school. The National Forum has identified four "schools to watch" that are well on their way toward fulfilling that vision and meeting those criteria. An affiliate, the Southern Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, includes 50 middle school educators and organizational representatives from nine states. Another encouraging sign that school systems are embracing middle school reform is the growth of the National Urban Middle Grades Reform Network, a support group composed of central office administrators who have primary responsibility for coordinating middle school reform in their respective school systems.

But using the word "reform" and actually reforming middle schools are two different things. Where does one begin? I believe it is necessary to move simultaneously on many fronts. I want to discuss only several of these.

We need to find a common language

Middle school advocates face a major communications challenge. Most people simply do not understand why middle schools exist or why the opportunities they should provide for young adolescents are different from those at the elementary and high school levels. Even knowledgeable middle school practitioners lack a common

language for clearly communicating the practical strengths of middle schools. Instead, their rationale for middle schools is rooted in a philosophy they find difficult to articulate.

The result is that, for most people, including many teachers, the purpose of middle schools is fuzzy, clouded by jargon that seems to have little relevance to the day-to-day challenges of teaching and learning. Middle schools have not been described in ways that speak to the core concerns of most families and educators. More important, too many middle schools have not functioned in ways that address those concerns.

For example, teams are an important component of most middle schools. To operate effectively, teams must be carefully developed. A team has to function as a team, not as a group of individuals who happen to occupy the same space and share responsibility for the same group of students. If schools make sure that teams operate as they should—and that is a big, big "if"—then teams should be assets that not only benefit students but manifest the strength of middle schools. There is potential to describe teams to a school board or a parent this way:

Our school doesn't just throw the sixth graders into a situation where they run from one class to another, banging into each other in the halls and dealing with a different teacher and a different group of students in each class. Instead, we assign our young people to a family of students supervised and taught by several teachers working together. This way, the students get to stay with the same classmates and the same teachers for most of the school day. They get to know their classmates and their teachers really well, they get to develop sustained and positive relationships, and the teachers collaborate to understand and address the learning needs of each student. When the teachers agree that some students need additional help in developing a particular skill, they have the flexibility to work with those students in a small, temporary group. Each team of teachers meets at least once a week to examine the

students' work and discuss their progress, their problems, and how to address them. They work together to figure out the best ways to help students progress toward meeting our state's academic standards.

As I said, this means nothing if it does not reflect the reality of what is happening in the school and in the teams, but if it does, it may illustrate how to communicate one of the strengths of middle schools. In any case, the middle school movement and its leaders need to hone their messages so that both policymakers and the public understand the tangible, not the philosophical, benefits middle schools offer, and what they should expect from middle schools.

Reform is about changing people, not just programs

But even compelling descriptions of effective middle school practices are no substitute for the hard work of reform. That work is often more about changing the attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and skills of teachers than about new programs or school structures.

This hard work is somewhat less burdensome because of the evolution of what we might call the technology of middle school reform. There are now resources and tools that middle school leaders can use to advance reform that did not exist just a decade ago. For example, the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) offers its *Standards for Staff Development: Middle Level Edition,* a study guide that means administrators no longer have to fly blind in planning and managing staff development for their faculties. This resource helps them know potentially effective staff development from that which is ineffective. Another NSDC publication, *What Works in the Middle: Results-Based Staff Development,* developed recently with support from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, describes a total of 26 staff development programs in language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and interdisci-

plinary programs that can help increase student achievement. Within a few months, the Education Development Center will publish guides to help middle schools identify curricula in math, science, and language arts that teachers can use to help students progress toward performing at standard. There is also an internet site, MiddleWeb (www.middleweb.com), that provides a wealth of information for middle school reformers, but its potential has not been fully tapped by teachers and administrators.

The major development in the technology for middle school reform is the creation of designs for whole-school reform. Pioneered by New American Schools (NAS), each design is a blueprint for reorganizing an entire school rather than a single program or grade level within it, and includes technical assistance to help schools implement these designs successfully. All NAS designs have been validated through extensive research and testing. The NAS-authorized designs now include one specifically focused on middle schools; it is the Turning Points design, based on the report issued by the Carnegie Corporation in 1989. There are other whole-school reform models worth considering, as well, most notably the Talent Development Model Middle School.

In fact, there are so many whole-school reform designs that there are also guides that schools can use to learn more about them and assess their potential use. Under contract from a coalition of major national education organizations, the American Institute for Research conducted a study of various whole school reform models and produced a report, *An Educator's Guide to Schoolwide Reform,* published by the Educational Research Service (ERS). ERS has also published three other helpful guides: *Blueprints for School Success: A Guide to New American School Designs, Comprehensive Models for School Improvement: Finding the Right Match and Making It Work,* and *Handbook for Research on Improving Student Achievement.*

These resources are not "cookbooks." They are not the "Idiots' Guide to Middle School Reform." If principals and teachers are waiting for that, we will probably never have reforms that will cause young adolescents to perform at the levels of proficiency of which they are capable. But there are now many very useful resources middle level educators can use to reform their schools. One can no longer say that there are no models, no best practices, no strategies, no techniques, no assistance, or no high-performing schools to see or from which to learn. The issue now is whether middle level educators have the will and determination to use available resources to reform their schools so they more demonstrably benefit students.

We need clear evidence of the effectiveness of reform

The last challenge to middle school reform centers on the issue of results. How will principals, teachers, and communities know whether students are performing at higher levels and whether they are becoming more caring and responsible young people?

We know that the letter grades teachers give do not mean much because they reflect individual teacher judgment and are often based as much on whether a student completes an assignment or on the teacher's perception of the student's effort as on the quality of the student's work. We know that students' scores on state tests are one indicator of what students know and can do, and that the numerical score reports that appear in newspapers and even the disaggregated scores that states send back to schools are confusing both to the public and to teachers. The ways in which these scores are reported and interpreted do not help either the public or educators truly understand whether middle school students are learning more and, more important, whether students can remember and apply what they learn.

The effect is that middle schools are captive to assessment systems that may be useful to states for accountability purposes,

but which do not present a complete picture of how well students are learning. It is as if states are using out-of-date x-ray technology to track a young adolescents' growth over time. You can see the skeleton develop, but you cannot see the development of muscles, brain, or values. You can tell whether a certain type of growth is taking place, but you cannot tell whether and how the young person is growing in other very important ways.

As a result, most middle schools are not able to demonstrate that they are more successful than other middle schools in causing *all* students, in *every* quartile, to learn at higher levels, identify and develop their talents, and apply both their learning and their talents to strengthen their school communities. Instead, many schools are scrambling to satisfy demands for a higher, single numerical score that represents aggregate student performance. These demands will not subside, nor should they so long as middle schools are unable to provide more compelling evidence that student performance at all levels is increasing significantly.

This is a major unmet challenge of middle school reform. There is a lot of work to do to develop and use processes that can produce clear evidence of the effects of reform. Some elements for doing so exist now but are rarely used. Student work that is tightly linked to standards—particularly student writing, science and social studies projects, and solutions to challenging mathematics problems—can be displayed more visibly throughout schools and in the community. Schools can bring in small groups of business leaders to see students engaged in applying their learning. Students can lead parent-teacher conferences to show and discuss what they are learning and how they are seeking to improve their performance.

The models and experiences for how to do these things are available, but I know of few middle schools that have gone beyond the state test to weave such demonstration and assessment methods into a coherent strategy to provide evidence of the school's benefit to students. This is an issue that middle schools

and the movement for middle school reform must address. If they do not, middle schools will continue to be on the defensive and will fail to get the support they need to meet the education challenges that seem to increase each year.

Reform depends on leadership

There is no question that hopes for middle school reform are more promising now than they have been at any time during the past decade. There is growing consensus that reform is necessary. There is more certainty about the reforms that are necessary, and there are more resources for implementing the reforms. But there is a critical missing ingredient. There are not enough leaders to mobilize all the people necessary to bring middle school reform to fruition.

I hope you will embrace the vision of middle school reform and provide the leadership your teachers and students need to understand and act on that vision. The fundamental message of that vision is that middle schools can be more rewarding for administrators, teachers, and students, but for that to occur the performance levels of administrators, teachers, and students must increase concurrently.

This will happen only through thousands of individual actions and just as many collaborations. I do not have to tell you that many of the people who must act and collaborate—administrators, teachers, and students—merely want to get out of bed every morning, come to school, and do their job pretty much as they have always done it, without any greater inspiration or effort. Those people need you. They need you to help them learn and grow and become more powerful and effective than they ever thought possible. They need you to provide the support and safety that makes it possible for them to learn and change. This is a prerequisite for middle school reform, and it will not happen without your leadership.

The War We Are In

In this address, Hayes Mizell urges an audience of state education department staff, school administrators, and teachers to use the weapons at their disposal—including academic standards, professional development, and the power of their own will—to mount an all-out campaign to increase student achievement among young adolescents. The conference was held in July 2000 in Nashville, Tennessee, and was sponsored by the Southern Regional Education Board.

ABOUT 160 MILES from here there is a small city that did not exist 58 years ago. In 1942, the federal government carved the town of Oak Ridge out of 60,000 acres of wooded ridges and hilly farmland, sweeping away four existing small communities and displacing 1,000 families. By mid-1945 there were three huge plants on the site, operating seven days a week, 24 hours a day, employing 82,000 people. The plants consumed 20 percent more electricity than New York City. In just three years, Oak Ridge grew from a sparsely populated rural area to the fifth largest city in Tennessee.

The federal government created Oak Ridge to produce plutonium for the atomic bombs that the United States used to end its war with Japan. The spare-no-expense and do-whatever-it-takes philosophy that led to the creation of Oak Ridge was the result of our country's wartime desperation to manufacture the atomic bomb before Germany did so, and to use it to end the war as quickly as possible. The development of Oak Ridge demonstrated what people are capable of doing when they are under attack.

Today, it is hard to imagine our nation focusing and mobilizing with the intensity that led to the development of Oak Ridge and the atomic bomb. Yet we clearly need that same kind of resolve if we want to meet a daunting challenge that threatens our youth and perhaps in the long term our national security.

The education of young adolescents is under threat

In the year 2000, the education of young adolescents is seriously threatened. It does not face the overt destructive force of missiles or tanks or infantry. Yet the educational development of young people ages 11 to 15 is besieged by a set of complex but independent forces. Their approach is indirect, and the wounds they inflict are largely invisible; many of the casualties will not be apparent for years to come. The forces of attack operate in three divisions: low expectations, ineffective instruction and leadership, and schools that resist reform. They are present in every community and have many allies.

Am I being overly dramatic? Perhaps, but many people in this country believe we are in a war where the education of young adolescents is the battleground. In past decades, such a war would have been fought only by public schools, and it would have been the public schools' war to win or lose. But this is a new day in which other entities are not waiting to see how the public schools respond. Others are joining the fight, whether you want them to or not.

For example, experts estimate that by the beginning of the new school year there will be nearly 2,000 charter schools in operation throughout the United States, serving approximately 500,000 students. Twenty percent of these will be charter middle schools, and 24 percent will serve both middle and elementary students. Many families are also fighting the battle by themselves through the use of home schooling. Researchers estimate that families are schooling a total of between 1.2 and 1.8 million children at home. And

according to a recent report in the *New York Times*, the mayor of that city is exploring "the possibility of allowing private companies to manage some of the city's worst schools."

There is still more evidence of the accelerating movement to expand the educational options of families who have no alternative but to enroll their children in public schools serving their attendance areas. In a news article describing a recent United States Supreme Court decision, the *Wall Street Journal* reported: "Public money can be used to supply library books, computers and other teaching materials to religious schools, the Supreme Court ruled, giving a boost to school-voucher proponents and poking a hole in the wall separating church and state." If there is one thing you can count on, it is that in the coming months and years these trends will accelerate rather than diminish.

Some have chosen to fight

It remains to be seen who will gain the most ground in the war to increase the education outcomes of young adolescents, but those of you here today are certainly in the front lines. You have chosen to take a hard look at how your states and schools are educating youth in the middle grades, the achievement results you are producing, and the reforms you need to make to increase student performance.

This is a daunting task because many of you work in institutional and cultural contexts that make it difficult for you to carry out the tasks necessary to increase student achievement. Many of your bosses would like for you to produce better student achievement results, but few of them are supporting you to make the fundamental changes it will take for all students to perform at higher levels. Many of your principals and teachers are under tremendous pressure to raise test scores, but where is the intensive, sustained, high-quality staff development they need to increase their knowledge of subject content and improve the effectiveness of their

instruction? And, of course, few families are breaking down the schoolhouse doors demanding more challenging and engaging instruction for their children.

These difficulties lead some educators to conclude that the war is not worth the fight, that trying to reform public schools is like waging war in Vietnam; "waist deep in the big muddy," as a song of that era declared. That is why I am glad you are here. You have chosen to fight, knowing that there are major obstacles in your way, and that you do not have all the support you need to overcome them. Thank goodness there are soldiers like you in the field.

Standards are the first weapon at your command

I imagine that one of the reasons you are here is to learn more about the weapons at your disposal. Given that the terrain over which you must fight is rugged and that the opposition is formidable, what can you use that will turn the tide?

Some educators perceive content and performance standards to be so formidable that they do not believe they can make them work. Unfortunately, so many states and school systems have bungled the development and implementation of academic standards that they have badly damaged the credibility of standards. Under the headline, "Academic Standards Eased as Fear of Failure Spreads," the *New York Times* reported: "The states are acknowledging that, often because of financial concerns, they have not put in place the training programs for teachers, the extra help for students, and the other support necessary to meet suddenly accelerated standards. In some instances, they have also suggested that they may have expected too much, too soon."

Standards, however, are not the enemy. Fear of change is the enemy. Weak curriculum is the enemy. Lack of will and effort is the enemy. What makes the difference is how you think about standards and use them. Standards are not for the purpose of punishing students for their academic deficiencies. Standards are not an

excuse for narrowing a teacher's instruction to prepare students to pass a high-stakes test. For the middle grades, the purpose of standards is to focus school systems, schools, teachers, students, and their families on understanding what students should know and be able to do by the end of the eighth grade. You can use standards to make clear to everyone the academic mission of the middle grades.

Yes, there are problems with the language and interpretation of standards. They do not come to you on a silver platter of clarity. But whether and how standards make a difference depends on how you respond. Do you passively accept or resist the standards, or put them on the shelf, or try to pound the square peg of your curriculum and instruction into the round hole the standards represent? Or do you try to understand the standards, deconstruct them to root out their meaning and implications, and reshape your curriculum and instruction in whatever ways are necessary to enable students to perform at standard? It is up to you to use standards to prompt discussion, reflection, and action about how schools, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and communications need to change to increase student learning.

Various organizations are publishing more and more materials to help you put standards to good use. For example, the website of the Collaborative Communications Group includes materials written in plain English that schools can use to organize a "standards-based back-to-school night," or "an open house for parents to look at student work," or "a standards scavenger hunt." There is even an example of one school system's "standards-based report card." You can find a wide range of materials developed specifically to help middle school educators make sense of and use standards through the web site MiddleWeb, which I hope you know about and are using on a regular basis.

Staff development can be a potent force

There is another effective weapon you can use in the war to increase the academic performance of middle school students. It is a weapon many educators take for granted and abuse, a weapon with great potential although it is often loaded with blanks. Educators euphemistically refer to it as "professional development," but in too many cases the people responsible for conceiving, organizing, and implementing it use staff development in ways that impede the development of professionalism and effective practices.

Research by the Southern Regional Education Board documents the region's desperate need for high quality professional development. Consider these findings: almost two-thirds of sixth-grade mathematics classes are taught by teachers with elementary majors, while two out of five eighth-grade science classes are taught by teachers without a science major. In grade eight, 70 percent of the English classes are taught by teachers with a major in either elementary education or home economics education. In addition, there is the pervasive problem of low reading performance in the middle grades, and its ripple effect on student achievement in the core content areas. Very few middle school teachers have the knowledge and skills to attack this problem.

Under these conditions, it is no wonder that so many middle school students are unable to perform at standard. How can we expect them to do so? Some people may think that a teacher's knowledge of subject content is not so important because they believe any reasonably literate and intelligent adult should be able to keep several steps ahead of the students. Some people may argue that any such adult should be able to know more than the students. I would simply ask those people if they would want such a teacher to be responsible for the education of *their* child, or *their* grandchild, or *their* niece or nephew. No, a teacher's knowledge of subject content matters, and it matters a lot. It has everything to

do with how confident the teacher feels, how creative the teacher is able to be, and how effective the teacher is in engaging students in learning.

But as the SREB data indicate, states, school systems, and schools have a massive adult remediation job to do. They have to both remedy the inadequate content preparation many teachers received in college and develop teachers' skills and confidence as classroom managers and instructional leaders. They cannot wait for the reform of pre-service education. There are no shortcuts. It is wrong to place on students the whole burden for raising student achievement. That is like expecting the nonmilitary population to win the war. Besides, placing a disproportionate burden on students will yield only incremental gains. To get significantly higher levels of performance from students, teachers will also have to perform at much higher levels.

Professional development is the means toward that end. But not just anything called "professional development" will do the job. We already know that many traditional types of staff development do not work. They do not increase teachers' knowledge of subject content, and they do not improve teachers' instructional effectiveness. They waste money, and they waste teachers' time.

Nevertheless, the discredited and unproductive forms of professional development continue. They do not continue by accident. In every school system, in every school, someone, a specific person, makes a decision about the staff development a school system or a school will offer or support. Those people need to hear from leaders like you that the teachers you work with, and their students, cannot afford staff development in the future that is as ineffective as staff development has been in the past. If you do not do this, who will?

If you are part of the decision-making process about staff development, I urge you, I beg you, I plead with you to think deeply and critically about how to create staff development opportunities

that will demonstrably increase teachers' subject matter knowledge and instructional effectiveness. I hope you will ask two very simple questions to judge whether a certain type of professional development deserves your support: Will it cause teachers to perform more effectively in the classroom? Will you be able to see evidence that teachers are using what they have learned?

There are other weapons, too

Many weapons are available for your fight to help all students perform at significantly higher levels. Everything depends on whether you choose to use those weapons and whether you use them correctly, which is to say, so that they impact student achievement, or incorrectly, so they make little or no difference.

You have the weapon of data about student achievement. Your challenge is to use the data sooner rather than later to reform your schools, and make necessary but difficult changes in curriculum and instruction.

Another weapon is collaboration among teachers to examine and analyze student work. This process can help teachers understand the links between what and how they teach, the assignments they develop and give, and how students perform in relation to standards.

Rubrics are a weapon for helping students assess their own work and understand the need for practice and effort if they want to reach higher levels of performance. The consistent use of rubrics can sharpen the thinking of teachers and students about the quality of work teachers expect from students and the relationship between various levels of quality and the grades students receive.

You also have the multi-stage weapon of eliminating low level courses, assigning students to classes so all receive instruction of comparable quality, and going the extra mile to provide low-

performing students with significantly more hours of higher-quality instruction.

But do you have the will?

But perhaps the most effective weapon at your disposal is what people call "will." My dictionary lists nine definitions of "will," but I call two of them to your attention: (1) "The mental faculty by which one deliberately chooses or decides upon a course of action," and (2) "The power to arrive at one's own decision and to act upon it independently in spite of opposition." In terms of increasing student achievement, we might rephrase the definitions in the form of two questions: (1) "Do you really want to do it?" and (2) "Are you willing to do almost anything to get it done?"

Everything depends on how you answer those questions. No matter how effective the weapons are at your disposal, whether those weapons are money or time or strategies or methodologies or techniques or programs or projects, they will make no difference for students if you do not have the will to pick them up and use them effectively to increase student achievement. No weapon to improve student performance will jump into your hands and operate automatically. And no weapon is foolproof; all of them can be used carelessly and dangerously, and they often are. Everything depends on your will to find the weapons you need to increase student learning. Everything depends on your will to prepare yourselves and your colleagues to use those weapons effectively.

Wars produce heroes, slackers, and deserters

Each of you is here because in your respective states and school systems you are in the vanguard of educators who want to reform middle schools so they help students perform at standard. In any war, there are risks to being on the front lines. It is no different in the war to increase student achievement at the middle level. It takes courage to be among the first to step onto new ground. It

takes will to break out of old, ineffective patterns of practice and learn how to make the best use of promising new weapons for middle school reform.

The war to increase student achievement, like any war, will be messy and unpredictable. There will be advances and setbacks, but it will be necessary to press forward every day. In the war to increase student learning in the middle grades, as in any war, there will be heroes and slackers. There will also be deserters. This war, like other wars, will be won by the ordinary foot soldier who every day struggles over rugged and dangerous terrain to defeat the forces of low expectations, ineffective instruction and leadership, and resistance to reform. You are the foot soldiers.

Like other wars, this war cannot be won by the individual soldier acting alone. Each person must fight hard, but battles can be won only by determined and brave soldiers working together as an organized unit, trusting each other, supporting each other, communicating with each other, and learning from each other. In your school systems and schools, people engaged in this fight have to work together to be successful. They may not love each other or even like each other, though that helps, but they do have to respect each other and work together as a unit, no matter what.

You are the foot soldiers. Your gallantry and your sacrifice may never receive the recognition you deserve, but this war cannot be won without you. I thank you for choosing to join the growing ranks of educators who are answering the call to educate young adolescents more effectively. I thank you for taking up arms to win this war, and not leaving the fight to others.

Who Will Advocate for Middle School Reform?

According to Hayes Mizell, everyone–parents, communities and especially educators–has an obligation to become a determined and practical advocate for middle school reform and student achievement. He explained why advocacy is important at a meeting sponsored by the Southern Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, in June 2001 in Memphis, Tennessee.

ACCORDING TO THE DICTIONARY, an advocate is one who "pleads the cause of another," and advocacy is "the act or process of advocating or supporting a cause or proposal." When people hear the word "advocate," they often think of lawyers. A few of you may remember that many years ago a popular television program about lawyers was simply titled, "The Advocates." But for some years now, other professions have adopted the concept of advocacy. I recently received a newsletter from the Partnership for Kentucky Schools with an article titled, "Turning Principals into Advocates." A year ago the National Staff Development Council devoted an entire issue of its journal to advocacy. It seems that even educators are now recognizing the need for and value of advocacy.

The role of the advocate is an ancient concept. For example, in Deuteronomy 24, verses 14 and 15, we find an advocate's statement that is relevant even today:

"You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brethren or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns; you shall give him his hire on the

day he earns it, before the sun goes down (for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it)."

In the New Testament there are many examples where Jesus is an advocate. Beyond that, Jesus also demonstrated a keen understanding of one of the basic strategies of advocacy. To illustrate to the disciples that they should persist in their prayer, according to Luke 18: 1-5, He told this story:

"In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'"

An advocate represents the ignored and the vulnerable

Despite these endorsements in the Bible, advocacy is rarely well received by the established institutions of our society. This is because advocates usually seek to advance the interests of people who are ignored or ill-served by those institutions.

For example, the Center for Patient Advocacy is dedicated to "securing patient access to quality health care." The National AIDS Treatment Advocacy Project "strives to provide the very latest HIV drug development, research, and treatment information." Every state has an organization similar to the one in California named Protection & Advocacy, Inc., which "works in partnership with people with disabilities to protect, advocate for and advance their human, legal and service rights." The State of Kentucky even has a Department of Public Advocacy which "stand[s] up for citizens who are accused by the state of having committed a crime." And the National Coalition of Advocates for Students, a group of 20 organizations in 14 states, "works to achieve equal access to a quality

public education for students who are most vulnerable to school failure."

These and hundreds of organizations like them—most without the word "advocacy" or "advocates" in their titles—have sprung up during the past 30 years for three major reasons: (1) new laws have extended services that public institutions are obligated to provide and defined client rights that institutions are required to observe; (2) the laws and subsequent administrative regulations have become increasingly complex, exceeding the capacity of individuals to understand and use them; and (3) many citizens have learned from experience that major public institutions do not always operate as they should or provide equal access to their benefits.

It is not surprising, then, that advocacy is usually valued by people who may potentially benefit from it—that is, ordinary citizens—but it is usually less welcomed by employees of institutions who are on the receiving end of it.

Young adolescents need our advocacy

What does any of this have to do with middle school reform? After all, for the past few decades, several national organizations have advocated educational practices that they believed would better serve young adolescents. Many schools implemented those practices, yet the results were often mixed, usually because the implementation was untouched by the factors of quality, consistency, and continuous improvement.

As policymakers have increased their demands that students demonstrate higher levels of performance, middle level schools have come under greater scrutiny. Everything from the viability of schools' grade structures to their curricula and the preparation, content knowledge, and pedagogy of teachers is now under review.

In this context, advocacy is both appropriate and necessary. Left to themselves, many middle level schools will not improve significantly. Every year, every day, there are hundreds of thousands

of young adolescents who are attending schools that do not provide the educational opportunities their students deserve and need. Most of these students have no advocates. Many of their parents are burdened, or distracted, or simply do not know how to begin to advocate for the reforms necessary for their children to participate in more engaging, meaningful, and challenging academic work.

The officials in charge of the schools, particularly the school boards and superintendents, continue to rationalize their neglect of the middle grades by believing that if they can only get students to read proficiently by the end of the third grade, then challenges at the middle level will diminish. In doing so, they turn a blind eye to the developmental realities and intellectual appetites of young adolescents, choosing to believe that those students need little more than a firm hand and a kind heart.

This will not change unless and until advocates step forward, organize, and act for more effective middle level education. Anyone can be an advocate—a citizen, a parent, a businessperson, an educator, or a community-based organization—but because advocacy requires a good deal of intestinal fortitude, most people are more comfortable and effective acting as part of a group.

Educators must become advocates, too

Can we really expect educators to be advocates for improvements in middle level education, especially when the types and scale of the improvements necessary will require the educators themselves to become serious learners? Will educators become advocates if they know that one result will be that they have to understand the developmental needs of the children they teach, master their subject content, hone the craft of their pedagogy, and demonstrate improved performance? Can we really expect teachers to advocate for interests other than their own if a potential consequence is that they will no longer be able to exercise absolute discretion over what and how they teach?

These are open questions, and thus far there is little evidence to encourage us. But one thing is certain--accelerating middle grades reform depends not just on parents or concerned citizens or advocacy organizations. Educators must also pick up the mantle of advocacy for middle school reform.

There are many types and styles of advocacy, but advocacy is likely to be more effective if it is buttressed by moral authority and long-term commitment. In the arena of middle school reform, this means that advocacy for improvements that benefit students are more likely to be taken seriously than advocacy for the status quo. If advocacy is just about preserving a school's grade structure or maintaining two preparation periods for teachers, it will probably be seen as self-serving and unrelated to serious reform.

This suggests that advocates have a special obligation to focus on improvements that will make a significant difference in students' learning and development. Advocates will have the best chance of achieving that result if their goals, at least for the near term, are narrow and if the advocates are thoughtful and clear about the steps that will most likely lead them to those goals. Advocates seldom achieve their goals quickly but, armed with a just cause, time, tenacity, patience, courage, credible information, and the ability to identify and work with others of like mind, advocates often achieve great things.

Effective persuasion is at the heart of advocacy

The test for all of us who believe that middle level schools can and must improve is whether we can become effective advocates, with the focus and savvy to have an impact on education policymakers and school system leaders. Above all else, advocacy is about persuading institutions to change their policies and practices. That is the task that confronts us.

It is not enough to have a compelling vision or criteria schools should meet to fulfill that vision. It is not enough to develop and

issue policy statements. The real work takes place in face-to-face encounters with people who have the authority to set new directions and provide greater support for the educators who must pull themselves and their schools out of the muck of fatigue, resignation, and low expectations.

Yes, advocacy can be difficult, but it is not nearly so hard as sitting in a classroom bored out of your skull, wondering if anyone gives you credit for having a brain. It is not nearly so hard as knowing that you have a lot to learn even though you lack the self-confidence and support you need to learn it. It is not nearly so hard as coping with a climate of fear and disrespect, wondering from which quarter the next put-down will come.

If we keep this in mind, we will advocate for middle school reform not by proposing arcane educational practices but by persuading people in authority to implement practical policies and practices that will enhance the learning and development of young adolescents.

Part II.

Getting it Done

Working to improve our middle schools takes significant commitment and resources. Here, Hayes Mizell reminds his audiences that the key to successful reform is an unwavering commitment to help students learn. And while some might "hit walls" on this "rocky trail" to better schools, everyone must keep his or her eye on the ultimate goal–serving "all children well."

SHAZAM! No Lightning Bolts in School Reform

Everyone involved in improving middle schools sometimes wishes for special powers. Hayes Mizell reports that, unfortunately, there are no lightning bolts. In this address, delivered to a group of the Foundation's middle grades grantees in March 1997, he recommends greater clarity of purpose and a commitment to going deeper in the quest for standards-based middle grades reform.

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER—much, much younger—I read comic books. I should add that I also read literature other than comic books, but I enjoyed comic books. I bought them, I traded them, and, when I didn't have money to go to the cowboy movie on Saturday afternoon, I sold used comic books from the front porch of our house.

My favorite comic books were those that featured characters we now call "super heroes": Superman, Batman, Captain America, the Green Lantern, the Torch, the Submariner, Plastic Man, and, yes, even Wonder Woman. One of my favorites was Captain Marvel. As you know, characters like Superman and Batman disguised their powers in the persons of adults, like Clark Kent or Bruce Wayne. This allowed them to mingle with regular people except at critical moments, when they could transform themselves and use their super powers or talents to bring criminals to justice. But Captain Marvel was unique. In ordinary life, Captain Marvel was a young adolescent, a newsboy named Billy Batson.

At some time in his life, Billy Batson had had the good fortune of encountering a wizard named Shazam, who bestowed special

powers on him. When confronted with a crisis, Billy called upon those powers by shouting the word "Shazam!" which is not a word but an acronym: S for Solomon (meaning wisdom); H for Hercules (strength); A for Atlas (stamina), Z for Zeus (power); A for Achilles (courage), and M for Mercury (speed). As soon as Billy yelled "Shazam!" the god Zeus would hurl a lightning bolt to Earth, it would hit Billy Batson, there'd be a cloud of smoke, and Billy would be transformed into Captain Marvel. Then, with bulging muscles, in red tights and the symbol of a yellow lightning bolt on his chest, he would speed off after the bad guys.

I am thinking of Captain Marvel today because I suspect that what made that super hero appealing to me many years ago lingers in the unconscious of those of you engaged in middle school reform. Is there not a teacher among you who has wished that at certain times on certain days you could say "Shazam!" and be instantly transformed into a less vulnerable, more powerful classroom leader? Is there not a principal here who has fantasized about hurling a lightning bolt down the hall, hitting the teacher whose instruction is as ineffective today as it was three or five years ago, and instantly changing that teacher into a wholly new person? Is there not a central office staff person here who dreams that someday the Billy Batsons in principals' offices and teachers' lounges will recognize that they are in trouble, see the need for change, want to change, and at least cry for help?

We know, of course, that middle school reform is not a comic book experience, but that does not stop us from yearning for a Zeus—whether the school board, the superintendent, someone from central office, a principal, or even a foundation—to hurl the lightning bolt that will change everything.

No lightning bolts will rain from the sky

We are here today to become stronger and more powerful, not by yelling "Shazam!" but by learning from one another and bolstering

one another's resolve to forge ahead in the face of daunting obstacles. No lightning bolts will rain from the sky or from this podium. No one will magically transform you into more effective educators. That is up to you.

You will hear a lot of talk today about standards, but this meeting is not "about" standards, just as it is not "about" implementing standards. This meeting is about learning. It is about teachers learning. It is about principals learning. It is about central office staff learning. It is even about the foundation learning. Unless we all learn more and become much more proficient at what we do, the middle school students we care about will not perform at the higher levels of which they are capable. Student performance is directly linked to our performance. Standards are a means to improve both.

We cloak standards in a lot of complex concepts and education jargon, but at their core they are a way for us to communicate our academic expectations for students. For far too long, middle level educators have been unclear and confused about how to do this. In fact, I believe this continues to be true for most middle school educators. This is one reason we need standards.

Unless we are clear about what we want students to know and be able to do, students' lives will be torn by rip tides of conflicting messages about the purpose of their schooling. This is the current situation in many of your schools. Students do not read your schools' mission statements or school improvement plans, and, if they did read them, those statements would make no more impression on the students than they do on adults.

A school communicates its purpose through the attitudes and actions of individual teachers and administrators. Some teachers communicate that their purpose is to get through the day unscathed. Students understand this message very well, and their performance reflects their teachers' lassitude and focus on the clock. Other teachers communicate that their purpose is to teach

"the students who want to learn." This message is not lost on the other students, whose performance reflects their teachers' lack of commitment and misplaced priorities. Conversely, there are teachers, many of them in this room, who communicate every day through their fiery determination, dogged preparation, and unflagging support that their purpose is that students can and will learn. It is not surprising that the academic performance and on-task behavior of their students is the envy of many less successful teachers.

The middle level schools in your communities are sending many different messages to young adolescents. Some of those messages are like a mantra on an auto-reverse cassette tape, so incessant, so numbing, and so divorced from positive action that no one pays attention any more: be responsible, be quiet, be on time, behave. Other messages suggest that, because they are placed at risk by their own developmental issues and by many negative forces in their communities, students are powerless, that they bring nothing to their school experience except the need to be protected. In effect, the school communicates not only that the students are weak, but that the school must respond in kind by lowering its expectations for both students and itself.

Student learning is the first priority

If we want students to learn, we have to get our message straight. Standards can help us. If standards are clear and meaningful, we can use them to communicate among ourselves and to others what students should know and be able to do as a result of their experiences in the middle grades. Standards can provide educators, families, and communities with a better understanding of the purpose of middle school education. We can use standards to focus ourselves, our schools, and our students on learning and performance. Standards can help us become more conscious of the quality of student work and prompt us to scrutinize that work more closely

and agonize over it more productively. Standards can be a tool for teachers to use to help students understand that effort and completion of work are important steps toward carrying out an assignment, but that the quality of their work indicates the level of their performance. If we do it right, students will learn more and perform at higher levels. Even test scores will increase.

To achieve these results, however, we will have to work our way out of a lot of bad habits. If student learning is going to become the most important thing in your schools, everything else cannot be equally important. The priority is the priority. Number one is number one. Standards are not number one; they are a means to achieve number one, student learning. Middle school reform is not number one; it is a means to achieve number one, student learning. Staff development is not number one; it is a means to achieve number one, student learning. Testing is not number one; it is a means to achieve number one, student learning.

If students do not learn more, then our use of standards is flawed. If students do not learn more, then we are reforming the wrong things or reforming the right things in the wrong ways. If students do not learn more, then we either are not developing staff effectively or they are not using their development in ways that benefit students. If students do not learn more, then our testing is for the wrong purpose or we are using the test results in the wrong ways. There are really two challenges here: to work ourselves out of the bad habit of making everything the priority, and to hold ourselves accountable for the means achieving the ends.

Schools must embrace standards

Your school systems and schools have taken important steps toward using standards to increase student learning and performance. While politicians and pundits debate the virtues of national and state standards, your school systems are among the very few in the nation trying to make standards work. You know better than

the critics that advocating standards is one thing, putting them to work for students is quite another.

In most of your school systems, standards are now at least a topic of considerable conversation. More teachers and administrators and parents understand why standards are important and are beginning to use them to focus their teaching and their schools' missions. There are also those who have put the standards on the shelf, waiting to see if performance standards and assessments will follow. These are the people who have decided that, rather than do what is right, they will wait to see if the price of not doing what is right becomes too high.

Some of you still consider standards-based reform as one more project, one more activity on your schools' very long list of priorities. However, you cannot achieve this reform at the margins. If you try, you will see marginal results. Your schools will either use standards to mobilize the entire school community for student learning and hold yourselves accountable for the extent to which students do or do not perform at standard, or your schools will continue to conduct business as usual with the usual results. These may sound like harsh words, but they are not nearly so harsh as the consequences students will face if we do not help them learn how to perform at higher levels. If we do not believe that most students can perform at standard, and if we are not serious about implementing reforms that will enable them to do so, then there is no point in having standards because students will never know the difference.

Most of your school systems have now passed through the first phase of standards-based reform. You have content standards in place and are well on your way toward developing performance standards or grading guidelines. More teachers are becoming knowledgeable about standards and rubrics. There is more agreement among schools and across districts about what to teach and when to teach it. Some teachers display standards prominently on

their classroom walls and, more important, make sure students understand that a lesson or a project is linked to one or more specific standards. You have made a good beginning, but it is only a beginning.

Each of your school systems has made a commitment that a certain percentage of graduating eighth grade students in each school will perform at standard by the year 2001. In most cases, the percentage is quite high. Some people doubt that the eighth grade class of 2001 will be able to perform at the levels necessary for you to meet the goals you have set for yourselves. The fact that some of your school systems are getting out of the starting gate more slowly and less efficiently than others is not encouraging. It causes us to wonder if some school systems have fundamental problems of priority, culture, management, or strategy.

In all the school systems, however, whatever their stage of development, efforts toward enabling students to perform at standard have been wide but not deep. Most schools and classrooms have changed little, and there has been little change in teacher or principal performance. Perhaps this is to be expected because so far your emphasis has largely been on systemic efforts to develop standards, disseminate them, educate people about them, and train teachers how to implement them. We have to move beyond this phase. Schools must aggressively embrace standards-based reform, not simply as one more project but as the centerpiece of schools.

The term "standards-based reform" is broad and includes many actions and activities. What characterizes them all is that schools use these actions and activities to help students learn what is necessary for them to perform at standard, that they hold some promise of being more effective than current practices. Under standards-based reform, no school or classroom practice is politically or professionally or educationally or bureaucratically "correct." The only criterion for what you do is whether the practice enables students to learn what they need to perform at standard. Learning

and evidence of learning as they relate to standards must become the driving force of every middle level school.

I realize that this will not be easy. It will require many teachers and principals to take the radical step so vividly described in the chorus of an old spiritual: "Gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside." There are a lot of educators out there crouching defensively behind the swords and shields of personal preferences, comfortable teaching styles, and cherished beliefs about middle school education, all unsupported by evidence that they benefit students. There are schools that are so cold, so focused on everything but learning, and so obsessed with daily operations that they might as well be swords and shields. Students will not perform at standard if this continues. Teachers and administrators have to lay down their swords and shields and pick up the challenge of doing whatever is necessary to increase student learning.

Standards-based reform needs to go deeper

If your school systems and your schools are going to meet the performance goals you have set for yourselves, standards-based reform will have to penetrate much more deeply into schools. This is not to say that central offices should abandon their systemic initiatives to advance standards-based reform across all middle level schools throughout their districts. In fact, it means just the opposite. School boards, superintendents, and central office staffs must be even more strategic and aggressive to get schools to take standards seriously and implement reforms that will enable students to perform at standard.

School systems cannot take this step, however, if they value site-based decision making more than increasing student performance and if they are excessively patient with schools that fail to take whatever action is necessary to increase student learning. It is essential for school systems to communicate consistently to all

their middle schools that it is important for students to meet standards, to hold schools accountable for increasing levels of student performance, and to provide schools with the freedom and support to implement reforms for that purpose.

Systemic initiatives are important, and we must sustain them, but increasing proportions of students will perform at standard only in places where teaching and learning come together. Schools are not the only places where this can and should occur, even in relation to standards, but schools bear most of the burden for the formal teaching-and-learning process. In schools, we find this process most visibly and intensely manifest in interactions between teachers and students. If more students are going to perform at standard, we are going to have focus much more on improving the substance and quality of teaching and learning.

Recently, the National Assessment of Educational Progress released the results of its latest mathematics assessment. Although it reported some encouraging gains in student performance, it also reported that only 25 percent of eighth graders reached the competency level of "proficient." In California, 49 percent of eighth graders could not solve a problem that involved money or identify the fraction represented by a shaded portion of a rectangle. Let's face it, these problems of student performance will not be solved in state legislatures or central offices. The only way we will obtain better results is to focus expectations, resources, and support directly on teachers and students. Standards can help us.

If students are going to perform at higher levels, teachers must be central to the next phase of standards-based reform. We have to create conditions under which teachers increase their knowledge about and their comfort with the content they teach; only then will they become creative and flexible enough to meet the learning needs of all their students. We have to provide the expectation and support that will cause teachers to sharpen their pedagogical and

classroom management skills to more effectively engage all students in learning. We have to make sure teachers have access to and effectively use standards-based curriculum and materials, rubrics, and assessments. We have to provide teachers with the time and support not only for all this, but also for collaborating with one another to carefully examine student work and change their practice to improve the quality of student work.

If we are going to put a new emphasis on teaching and learning, tied explicitly to students performing at standard, we will have to come to grips with important infrastructure issues. One starting point is for schools and school systems to understand in greater detail how they currently use existing staff development resources and with what effect. I believe that in most school systems, and certainly in most schools, there is a very weak link, or no link at all, between staff development and teachers using what they learn through staff development to enable students to perform at standard. Schools must become much more intentional and vigilant about using all forms of staff development resources as means to increase student learning. Yes, I agree that schools need more resources for staff development, but I believe they must also demonstrate that they use their current resources strategically and effectively to increase student learning.

None of this is possible, of course, without true reform at the school level—and without principals providing strong leadership. It is not enough for principals merely to rally the troops. Principals must become much more familiar with the landscape they are asking their teachers to traverse. In other words, they need to know almost as much as their teachers about content and performance standards, assessment, rubrics, and similar issues. If principals expect teachers to improve their knowledge of content and the effectiveness of their instruction, and if principals are going to position themselves to make better use of staff development resources to achieve those results, then principals will have to

increase their own knowledge base and skills. School systems that take the initiative to provide quality professional development for this purpose will be making a wise investment and increasing the likelihood that principals will provide effective leadership for the second phase of standards-based reform.

You're not Billy Batson

None of this will come easy. There are all manner of potholes and washed-out bridges along the way. Experience has taught us that few of your current superintendents will be with you at the end of this journey. The same will be true of many principals. There will continue to be budget crises, illnesses, scandals, and more projects, initiatives, and special programs, some of which will contribute to student learning but many of which will not. All will be distractions from the task of helping students learn what they need to perform at standard. Even worse, they can lead to detours and serious setbacks.

There is only one way to make sure your school systems provide the expectation and support you will need to press forward in spite of these obstacles. Standards-based reform and its connection to student learning must be understood, really understood, and embraced by your communities, school boards, superintendents, central office staff, and building-level administrators and teachers. People other than you have to care about student learning and understand why and how standards-based reform is a means to achieve it. That means you will have to do a much better job of making standards understandable to many more people and of providing more useful information about school and student performance to all segments of your communities.

You will know you are making progress when the next time your school board interviews candidates for superintendent, the community demands that the school board focus the candidates on this central question: "How will you make sure that our principals

and teachers get the professional development, support, and supervision they need to enable students to perform at standard?" You will know you are not the only ones willing to do almost anything to increase student learning when even the poorest and least English proficient parents crowd school board meetings demanding better use of resources, more support, and more accountability for student learning.

None of this is possible without your leadership. Many of your school systems and schools have made the progress they have only because day after day you have kept pushing for middle school reform, winning converts one by one to the cause that all middle level students should and can achieve at significantly higher levels. Even though you have been pushed and tugged in different directions, you have kept your focus on student learning, always circling back to standards-based reform.

We continue to expect a lot of you. We know it is tempting to stick with the planning, with putting the building blocks in place, because you know how to do that. You have done it many times before. Students have come and gone, but the horizon of increased student learning has continued to recede. When are we simply going to focus on student learning, and do whatever is necessary to make sure that all students learn at significantly higher levels?

We are not asking you to do what you know how to do. We are asking you to do what you do not know how to do, or to do what you know how to do for some students, but to do it for all. We are asking you to increase student learning not in the long term but in the near term. Like Thomas Carlyle, the nineteenth century English essayist, we believe, "Our main business is not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand."

The task at hand is hard, and I know you are sometimes tired and dispirited, wondering if anything is really getting better, wondering if you are making progress. When you have those moments of doubt, I hope you will reflect on where your schools are, and

where they were three years ago. Most of you will see that you have made demonstrable progress, and that you have done it through a lot of faith and hard work.

Yes, it would be nice to be Billy Batson, to cry "Shazam!" and change in a flash of lightning, but you are not Billy Batson. You have more in common, it seems to me, with the Apostle Paul. He also went on long and dangerous journeys, carrying a new message of hope many people did not want to hear. Like Paul, you might also say, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed...Therefore, we do not lose heart."

You can increase student learning. For the sake of your students, you must increase student learning. Do not lose heart.

The Rocky Trail of Standards-Based Reform

Hikers on a difficult trail spend much of their time looking down at the ground, being careful where they place their feet. It's also important, Hayes Mizell proposes, to look around to see how far they've come—and gauge how far they have yet to go. In this talk to representatives from the Foundation's grantee districts in September 1998, Mizell reviews their progress so far and maps some of the challenges ahead.

PERHAPS LIKE MY FAMILY, you went hiking this summer. Or if you have hiked at any time you may have noticed a certain phenomenon of this activity. People hike to renew their contact with nature and enjoy sights and sounds that differ from those they experience in everyday life. Most people choose to hike where there is nice scenery: woods, lakes, meadows, or mountain vistas. Yet most hiking trails are not smooth paths; they may consist of loose stones, or be filled with exposed and tangled tree roots, or there may be a small stream or even trees right in the middle of the trail. No matter how beautiful the scenery is, hikers know they have to pay attention to the trail. If they don't look where they are going they may slip or trip and fall.

In fact, hikers often spend so much time looking down at the trail, being careful where they place their feet, that they need to pause frequently not only to catch their breath but to see how far they have come, to enjoy the scenery, and to gauge how far they have yet to go.

Like hikers, the teachers and administrators of your school systems have been spending a lot of time looking down at the trail. We have been very conscious of our footing, perhaps too conscious of it; sometimes we have been more cautious than we should have been. This meeting is an opportunity for us to pause on the trail, to assess how far we have come, to think about the trail ahead of us, and to make plans for reaching our destination. We hope you will use this opportunity to enjoy the comradeship of your fellow hikers and the scenery represented by the progress you have made to date.

Where are we? In truth, we are scattered all along the trail, some way ahead of others one day, only to fall behind and yield the lead the next.

Priorities: "Performance is important"

I think we can safely say that you have begun to shift the focus of middle level schools in your communities. You have delineated what students should know and be able to do, either by the end of the eighth grade or at each of the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade levels, and are using those standards to focus the attention of teachers, administrators, students, and families on learning.

Because you have either adopted performance standards or are in the process of doing so, you are stimulating more conversation about the level of performance students must demonstrate as evidence they meet your academic standards. It has taken longer than we had hoped for you to develop and begin to use content and performance standards, but they are beginning to take hold in more schools and classrooms.

Through your various initiatives for student accountability you are sending new messages to students and their families: "Performance is important." And "We believe you can meet the standards we have set and we expect you to work hard to meet them." And "There are consequences if you do not take these standards seriously."

For both the senders and the receivers, these messages are hard. They communicate new expectations, and if they are to mean anything your school systems and schools must have the resolve to live with the consequences. When significant proportions of your students do not perform at standard, it is not only a problem for them and their families, it is also a problem for the teachers and administrators who are responsible for educating those students. Teachers and administrators, as well as students, must be accountable for student performance, and they too must be subject to consequences.

Your school systems and schools have also made progress in devoting greater attention to students whose poor levels of previous preparation, lack of motivation or school skills, personal problems, or a combination of those, have caused them not to meet your academic expectations. You are providing more second chance opportunities than ever before and are more concerned with students not just acquiring additional seat time but actually demonstrating that they have attained the skills and knowledge embodied in your standards.

It is important to continue providing and mending those safety nets, but it is also important to evaluate them carefully. If during the next several years there is not convincing evidence that they are benefiting students academically, you will need to develop more effective approaches.

Staff development is focusing on teachers' needs and principals' leadership

Your school systems are also beginning to improve staff development. Increasingly, the staff development you provide is more standards-based, more responsive to teachers' real needs, and closer to the daily lives of schools and classrooms. But there is still a long, long way to go. You still know very little about whether and how teachers really benefit from staff development; whether they effec-

tively apply the new behaviors, knowledge, and skills you hope they learn from it; and whether the hundreds of thousands of dollars you spend on staff development results in more students performing at standard. Until you understand much, much more about the value and effects of your staff development, it will only be, at best, a shot in the dark.

It is also no small accomplishment that your school systems have begun to emphasize the role of principals in organizing and leading their schools to help students perform at standard. Again, there is more work to do, but there are greater numbers of principals who understand standards, who know what teachers must do to bring the standards to life in their classrooms, and who are willing to restructure their schools to increase teacher and student learning. The fact is that standards-based instruction and learning will not occur without principals who give more attention to improving teaching than to their more traditional management tasks. For this to happen, school systems will not only have to communicate that expectation to principals and assess their performance accordingly, but reduce the bureaucratic burdens that currently cause principals to spend more time in their offices than in their classrooms.

You have every reason to feel good about the progress your school systems and schools have made, but of course I don't want you to feel too good about it. Until there is more convincing evidence, and I don't just mean test scores, that significantly greater proportions of students are performing at standard, we can find little comfort about progress on the input side of the ledger. There is more work to do, and more of the right work to do. You have to keep focused. You have to think harder, not about planning and implementing activities but about executing reforms that are most likely to make the greatest difference in student learning.

Some remaining barriers to reform are deeply embedded

There are many barriers you have to eliminate or get over. Some barriers are deeply imbedded in the psychology, culture, and practice of your school systems and schools. For example, if you honestly look at who and what are the direct objects of your attention and energy, I think you will conclude that student learning suffers. Yes, you provide students with transportation, safe and comfortable learning environments, a wide variety of instructional media, meals, health and social services, co-curricular activities that promote their development, and adult supervisors and teachers who meet certain qualifications.

Providing that infrastructure necessarily consumes a great deal of your energy, but I think you will acknowledge that in the pie chart of schooling the adult and bureaucratic interactions occupy more space than interactions between adults and students devoted directly to student learning. The fact is that each day your school board members, superintendents, central office administrators and staff, and principals make important decisions about how they will use the money, time, opportunities, and priorities over which they have direct control. Unless you consciously reallocate a much greater share of those resources to increasing the learning of teachers and students and devote much less to maintaining the existing structure, operations, and cultures of school systems and schools, you will not see significant increases in student performance.

I implore you to be less tolerant and less timid. For reasons that are quite understandable because, after all, they have everything to do with maintaining your livelihoods, you defer more often than you should to adult rules, regulations, procedures, and prerogatives that undercut other efforts you are making to increase student learning. You take too few risks on behalf of students.

Students understand quite well who should not be leading a classroom or a school, and you too know who they are, but it is the

students, not you, who each year suffer those people's ineffectiveness. I don't care about their tenure. I don't care about their race. I don't care who their relatives are. I care that so long as they are in their current positions students will not perform at the levels of which they are capable. This will only change if you act.

Move more of your attention to the building and classroom

While you must continue to make the systemic changes necessary to advance and support standards-based learning, most of your attention now needs to be at the building and classroom levels. There are big gaps there. You need to know where they are and address them. However, I doubt that any of your school systems has a way to qualitatively and quantitatively assess the extent to which each school and each classroom is using standards and seeking to enable students to perform at standard. This is equivalent to a sports league where each team, and even each player, may or may not be playing well, but all the league commissioner knows is that some teams win more games than others.

Unless your school systems are clear about what standards implementation should look like at the building and classroom levels, and unless you can assess and report the extent to which standards are being used by each school and each teacher to increase student learning, standards implementation will mean little more than casting bread upon waters. I look forward to the day when your school systems are able to report—simply, understandably, and honestly—to your boards of education and to the Foundation the extent to which schools and teachers are using standards effectively. Until you are able to do that, you will not have the information you need to strengthen the teams and their players.

Beyond Standards: Getting to the real core of learning

Improving their performance will mean going beyond standards development and dissemination to the real core of learning: (1) the quality of teachers' assignments, (2) the quality of students' work, and (3) the quality of teachers' assessments of student performance. Standards posted in classrooms won't increase student learning, nor even will assignments keyed to specific standards.

To date you have been cutting through the epidermis, dermis, and subcutaneous tissue of standards-based reform; now you are hitting the muscle, torn but flexed to resist your incursions. This will not change unless you develop and execute building-level strategies that increase expectations for teachers' learning and cause teachers to collaborate to improve their assignments and assessments, and the quality of students' work.

I do not underestimate the difficulty of this cultural and operational shift at the building level. This is why school reform, not just instructional reform, is necessary. Schools have to take the initiative to create the structures and processes that make it possible for teachers to engage every day in learning how to improve their practice. This is not an option. School boards and superintendents and central office administrators must be firm that this reform will occur and provide schools with the leadership, support, and flexibility to achieve it.

Each of you has pledged that by June 2001 a specific proportion of students completing the eighth grade will perform at standard. The students who entered your sixth grades this year do not know that you have set this goal for them and for yourselves. They merely assume that their schools and teachers will help them learn what they need to complete the eighth grade performing at levels that will serve them well in the future.

Students are betting their lives

Your students are betting their lives that you will do whatever is necessary to make it possible for them to succeed in the future. They don't know about and they don't care about existing paradigms, your personal or professional relationships, or whatever it is that keeps you from taking actions that will help them perform at standard. They can only trust that you will act courageously and effectively on their behalf.

We share their trust. We marvel at the dedication and energy you bring to your task. We wonder how you get out of bed every day and how you balance the demands of your professional and personal lives. We hope that our partnership with you in this endeavor is more support than it is burden. If at any point this is not the case please tell us.

In a few days we will begin again our hike on this rocky trail, watching our footing as we take one step after another. For now, however, we can learn a lot from each other. Those in front can tell those behind where the dangers are, and which path to take when the trail diverges. Those behind can tell those in front to accelerate their pace because we are beginning to bunch up on the trail. We have a long way to go. It is dusk and soon night will fall.

Hitting the Wall

"Hitting the wall" is a painful sensation familiar to long-distance runners and high-altitude mountaineers. Recognizing that the educators in his audience may be feeling something similar, Hayes Mizell urges them to keep going on the road to reform. His comments were made at a September 1999 meeting of team members from the Foundation's four grantee districts to review their progress in implementing standards-based reform.

I AM SURE MOST OF YOU are familiar with the expression "hitting the wall." This phrase was originally used by runners to describe what happens between the eighteenth and twenty-fifth mile of a marathon. At that point, a runner's legs stiffen and hurt, and the work of running becomes much harder. High-altitude climbers experience a similar debilitation. Here is how one writer described the experience known as hitting the wall:

> It usually happens high on the mountain, when every muscle is screaming to quit. Here, the climber must mentally will the body to take each small and halting step. Like the staggering marathon runner, the climber must set small goals such as taking a hundred steps before looking up or going just to the next corner and then the next and then the next. At the same time, he or she must make sure each of thousands upon thousands of steps are safely placed, a daunting task when the body is exhausted and the oxygen-starved brain has difficulty concentrating. This muddled brain must also contend with crampons that come loose or headlight batteries that

> go dead–apparently simple things that at high elevation can take many minutes to correct. Overlying all this is the constant tension of knowing that one mistake can send you hurtling to your death.

These symptoms of hitting the wall are not unfamiliar to those of you who have now reached the higher altitudes of systemic, standards-based reform. You have been trudging through knee-deep snow, cautiously climbing over rocky ledges, and learning how to get across yawning crevasses. For some of you, the summit represented by eighth grade students performing at standard is within sight; for others it appears only momentarily before heavy clouds obscure it again. All of you, I suspect, are tired. You have been the leaders of your respective expeditions, trying to find the best route to the summit while many others remain at the base camp.

There are many reasons why you may be feeling you are hitting the wall. Maybe you underestimated just how long and difficult the climb would be, getting harder with each step, not easier. Maybe you put too much faith in your equipment–not just in the written standards, but in all the materials and accompanying tools that seemed so logical and compelling on their face but which have failed to meet the real-world tests of teachers' lack of time, or know-how, or incentive, or will to use them.

Or maybe for you hitting the wall is simply not knowing what to do next, or not coming to grips with doing what you know in your heart must be done. You have learned that no matter how inclusive your process for developing standards might have been, or how committed your school board and superintendent are to using them, this will not cause students to perform at standard. It may finally be dawning on you that long-standing structures and practices in your school systems and schools are more powerful than the standards. You may be realizing that merely making changes at the margins of those structures and practices is not

enough to effect the deep changes in teaching and learning that must occur to cause students to perform at standard.

The author of Matthew's gospel had it right: "Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; if it is, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved." The new wine of standards requires the new wineskins of reformed schools and classrooms.

Hitting the wall can be a valuable experience

Hitting the wall in standards-based reform is not a bad thing. Facing up to the very real limitations of schools is one of the toughest things to do in public education. The limitations I am talking about are not those of inadequate resources or time, but rather the assumption that little or nothing can be done that is substantially different from what is currently being done. It is almost as if there were wide agreement among the public and educators that the ways schools have operated for most of this century are, in fact, the best ways to educate children. So long as we assume that schools and classrooms must function substantially as they do now, what schools can do to cause students to perform at standard will be severely limited.

When we use the term "standards-based reforms," we are referring to reforms to school systems, schools, and instruction that achieve a particular result: many more students performing at significantly higher levels than is now the case. We are not talking about a vague awareness among teachers that standards exist, or that teachers have standards posted in their classrooms, or even that teachers link their lessons to standards. We are talking about changing schools and instruction so both cause all students to perform at standard.

Hitting the wall, then, is a signal for you to think more deeply about how to focus your energy. By now you should have learned that, in spite of pressures from many sources, you have to focus the

strategies and activities that have the greatest potential to increase student performance. If you do not know what those strategies and activities are, then it is no wonder you feel that you are hitting the wall. If you cannot look back over the past four years and confidently describe whether and how you know that your strategies and activities contributed directly to improved student learning, it means you have been wasting your energy and that of many other people. If you do not have such evidence, and if that evidence has not propelled you forward toward better results, you may just as well have been rolling dice.

Failure is acceptable if you know why you failed, and if you forthrightly acknowledge that failure, and talk about it and analyze it, and subsequently apply the lessons the failure taught you. Failure is acceptable if it causes you to act smarter, and to achieve better results. This, after all, is what learning is all about in the real world. Failure is not acceptable if you just keep trying, making the same mistakes over and over, throwing the dice again and again, never really understanding or acknowledging the reasons for the failure, never really acting differently or achieving better results. Hitting the wall is an opportunity to reassess your beliefs about how schools and instruction have to change if they are going to cause nearly all students to perform at standard, and how you will know whether the actions you take move students closer to that goal.

Your knowledge and skills have limits

Hitting the wall can also be a valuable experience because it should cause you to recognize the limits of your knowledge and skills. No matter what your position, there comes a point when you do not know what to do to cause people to behave differently. Effective strategies and activities are elusive. Teachers hit the wall when they lack the content knowledge or pedagogical skills to cause students to perform at higher levels. Principals hit the wall when they

lack an understanding of standards and the skills to guide teachers toward improving instruction. Superintendents and central office staff hit the wall when there is little evidence that their interventions and special programs are increasing student learning in persistently low-performing schools. Even school board members hit the wall when they realize that their policies have only limited effect on the day-to-day practices of principals and teachers.

Hitting the wall means that you are human, not all-knowing or all-powerful. If you can recognize that and take the initiative to find and draw upon resources outside yourselves and beyond your classrooms, schools, and school systems, you may be able to move forward more efficiently and productively. It is very unlikely that you will find convenient, risk-free solutions, or approaches that do not require courage and a strong will, but that is the price of achieving significant results rather than merely engaging in symbolic activity. We all admire the student who asks for help and uses the resources of the school and the community, but too many educators do not model those behaviors in their professional lives.

Some schools and classrooms can show persuasive evidence that, when schools operate differently and teachers learn and teach differently, even low-achieving students will perform at higher levels. Are you looking for those places? Are you learning from them? Are you breaking through the parochialism of your classrooms, your schools, your school districts, and your cultures and ideologies to find and use practices that can cause many more students to perform at standard, or are you clinging to that which is comfortable and low-risk, even if it is ineffective? What I am saying is, if you feel like you are hitting the wall, use those feelings in ways that will help you keep moving forward.

Students really know what hitting the wall is all about

As frustrated as you may sometimes feel about your progress, keep in mind that you share that feeling with many students in your classrooms and schools. They really know what hitting the wall is all about because every day they experience it in the educational settings you provide. They encounter structures and practices that are quite often mysterious and sometimes malevolent.

The wall students hit is made of many bricks: teachers who do not have a deep understanding of the content they teach, curriculum units that are as boring as they are arbitrary, standards that even the teachers do not understand, grading practices that depend more on the mood of the teacher than on the performance of the student, and pedagogy fashioned from the straw and mud of another time, for another people. Even this does not deter some students: they are the success stories you cling to and recount over and over to colleagues and friends.

But what about all the other students? What about those who hit the wall at the very time in their lives when they need someone to tell them they can reach the summit and help them find their way? Just keep in mind that when you feel you are hitting the wall, and it makes you feel tired and powerless and unsure what to do next, that is exactly, exactly, how many students feel. It is useful to reflect on that, and to use that awareness to shed your fear and exhaustion and to plow ahead, "taking a hundred steps before looking up," or going "just to the next corner and then the next and then the next."

Your students are counting on you. Some students are satisfied because they are performing well, but they should be performing at even higher levels. Some students are quite literally stuck in the middle, satisfied with their average performance because it seems to be all their teachers and schools require. Many, many students have no idea what academic success is because there are no living, breathing, practical performance standards that delineate the spe-

cific levels of proficiency that represent academic success. None of these students can perform at increasingly higher levels unless their schools and teachers routinely and demonstrably expect them to do so, and unless their schools and teachers obtain and use the knowledge and skills necessary to help them.

Standards are not enough. Accountability is not enough. What will really make the difference is the educational contexts you provide, and your will to provide only those that cause students to make significant progress toward performing at standard.

Standards: What You're Cookin' and What They're Smellin'

Playing off a saying used by professional wrestler and popular culture icon "the Rock," Hayes Mizell challenges his listeners to ask themselves whether their work on standards is actually showing up in students' academic performance–the real proof , he argues, that students are smellin' what their districts are cookin'. His audience was made up of educators from the school systems receiving support from the Foundation in September 2000.

SOME OF YOU HAVE NOT attended previous gatherings of the Program for Student Achievement, and I suspect you are wondering what the program is all about. You may have heard that we are interested in standards. Maybe you have participated in professional development the foundation has supported. Or perhaps you think we are just providing support to help improve your middle schools. Let me correct those impressions.

First, the Program for Student Achievement is about students. Students are the people we want to benefit from the foundation's grants to your school systems and organizations. Students matter more than anyone or anything in public education. How students perform is a barometer of a school's effectiveness. If students perform poorly, it means schools are performing poorly. If students are performing well, it means schools are performing well. The reality is that most schools perform well for some students and poorly for other students.

Too few schools demonstrate that they are willing to do whatever it takes, and I do mean whatever it takes, to perform well for all students. There are such schools, but few others seek to learn from them or have the will to apply the principles and practices that make the achieving schools effective. I know many people reject this simple construct of school and student performance, and that is why so many schools continue not to meet the learning needs of so many students. Students have to come first, and their performance has to be the gauge by which schools measure their effectiveness.

Student performance is what really counts

We believe there are thousands of students in your school systems who have the intellectual capacity and the need to perform at much higher academic levels. They need to do so because if they learn how to conquer content they now believe is difficult, it will prepare them to milk their secondary education for all it is worth. It will put them on the path to obtaining additional education after high school, and it will reward them with meaningful options when they seek work.

Most young adolescents cannot see this horizon, but you can. You can and should encourage, cajole, harangue, and preach to students to help them understand that the investment of their effort now can produce big returns in the future. We all know, however, that most of this will fall on deaf ears. Students will be far more impressed by what you do than by what you say. Students benefit when they see you using your authority to establish school cultures with high standards of performance for both educators and students. Standards matter when you translate them from words to deeds that help educators and students achieve more that they ever thought was possible.

We believe, then, that students come first. School systems have to be committed to that proposition. School systems do not exist to

be employment agencies or provide fringe benefits. School systems do not exist to develop policy manuals or issue administrative directives. School systems do not exist to be political playpens for adults. School systems exist for students, and unless every year, every student is learning and achieving more than he or she did the previous year, school systems are not doing their jobs.

What does this rather hard line mean in terms of your relationship with the foundation? It means that if you are a school board member or central office leader and you spend less than 75 percent of your time and energy on issues that directly shape, support, and improve student learning, we wonder what in the world you are doing. It means that if you are a teacher or administrator who participates in professional development funded by the foundation, it is because we believe it is important for educators to develop and apply new attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors that will improve student learning. If professional development does not benefit students, and if there is not evidence that students benefit, we are disappointed. If you participate in a foundation-funded project that helps parents and citizens learn more about their schools and become more active in improving their schools, it is because we believe that communities are just as responsible for increasing student learning as schools are. If parent and citizen involvement does not benefit students, and if there is not evidence that it benefits students, we are not satisfied.

Second, the Program for Student Achievement is about increasing the learning of all students. We know this goal is difficult to reach, as is providing credible evidence that students are really learning at higher levels. Yet we believe this must be the goal of public schools, and that schools must focus all their efforts on this goal and on collecting and sharing credible evidence that they are achieving it. More specifically, we really do expect that between the first day that students enter the sixth grade and the day they leave

the eighth grade, each year they should increase significantly their performance levels in mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies. We do not accept that an achievement dip is inevitable in the middle grades, or that attention to students' emotional and social needs is incompatible with attention to their academic needs. Both are important; students learn more when they simultaneously experience higher academic expectations and receive more intensive personal support.

Third, the Program for Student Achievement is about results. We know there can be no results without process; that is, without a sequence of dialogue, decisions, plans, and actions that produce results. We recognize that good process is necessary for good results. But we also know that in many school systems and schools the process is not of a high quality, or the process is endless, and the evidence is poor results or no results at all. When it comes to your need to meet and meet and plan and plan, we are understanding, we are tolerant, and we are patient, but we are not deaf and blind. One way or another we learn what the process yields. We not only expect results, we expect results that benefit students. This is to say that we are not impressed with what you say you are going to do, or what you describe on paper, or even with your site-based plans for school improvement. Those become credible only in the light of subsequent results supported by evidence that your efforts have benefited students.

There are, of course, many ways the Foundation could choose to try to advance student achievement in the middle grades, but in 1994 it decided to encourage a few urban school systems to use academic standards as a means to focus and improve teaching and learning. You will recognize that 1994 was slightly ahead of the curve of states' widespread development and promulgation of standards. We began with six school systems, but over time the Foundation chose not to continue funding three of them. The school systems that you represent are currently the only ones

assisted by the Foundation. This indicates that we also believe in accountability.

The development and use of content and performance standards is not a comprehensive strategy, and we do not intend it to be. Developing standards is not enough to increase student achievement. Disseminating standards or posting them in every classroom will not cause students to perform at higher levels. Standards are necessary for teachers, and administrators, and students, and families, and communities to understand what students should know and be able to do, but that is only the first step. The more difficult tasks are to align and reform curriculum, instruction, assessment, and staff development to cause students to perform at standard.

Are they smellin' what you're cookin'?

In the world of popular culture, there is a very interesting fellow called "the Rock." For those of you who are not familiar with this entertainer, he is a charismatic professional wrestler with a huge public following. The Rock has several intriguing public relations gimmicks, and one of these is a question he uses to challenge his opponents and excite his fans: He shouts, "Do you smell what the Rock is cookin'?"

Well, if your standards are what your school systems are cookin', they may not be not what your students are smellin'. There may be a disconnect between the standards that your school systems say students should meet and the curriculum and instruction your school systems are providing. Your curriculum—written lessons, activities, exercises, assignments, and supporting materials—may not provide the level of content or rigor that cause students to develop the knowledge and skills they need to perform at standard. The quality of instruction in your schools may not engage all students in opportunities to learn what they need to perform at standard. Classroom assessments may not be rooted in

performance standards. As a result, teachers, students, and families may have no idea whether students can demonstrate the proficiencies that indicate that students know and are able to do what the school system or the state expects.

The results of professional development may indicate that it is falling far short in helping teachers and administrators develop and apply the skills they need to ensure that students benefit from standards-based curriculum, instruction, assessment, and staff development. What your school systems are cookin' is represented by your content and performance standards. What your students are smellin' is indicated by their performance on standards-based assessments, or the closest thing to them. If your students are not smellin' what your school systems are cookin', then you need to work even harder to identify, trace, and eliminate the gaps that are preventing students from performing at standard.

Very few school systems are really serious about standards

Your school systems are among a very small number that are seriously trying to use standards to improve the education of all students. There are many school systems that are using standards, in most cases because their states insist on it, but few of these school systems seek to reform curriculum, instruction, assessment, and staff development so as to become interconnected, moving parts that cause all students to perform at standard. This is your challenge.

In each of your school systems, some components of standards-based reform are much stronger and more effective than they were five years ago, but they are still separate parts, sometimes even working at cross purposes. Your challenge is not to merely implement standards. Your challenge is not just for schools and students to be more accountable for their performance. Your challenge is to develop and activate a standards-based system in which you focus and align all its components to achieve the goal of

nearly all students performing at standard. As you are learning, standards-based reform really means whole system reform, not just a tweak here and a tuck there.

Your school districts are not yet exemplars of this kind of systemic, standards-based reform, but you can point to many solid accomplishments. You have mounted multiple intervention and support programs to better meet the academic needs of students who have the greatest difficulty performing at standard. You have provided school-based staff developers who work with teachers in their classrooms to help them learn how to engage students in standards-based lessons. You have reconstituted some persistently low-performing schools to provide students with more effective administrators and teachers.

Some of your school systems have recognized the literacy crisis in the middle grades and have launched major initiatives to improve students' basic reading skills and raise their comprehension levels. To communicate to your teachers, students, and families that your school systems are serious about standards, you have either developed standards-based report cards or are in the process of doing so. These actions are simple to describe but they are complex to execute effectively. The fact that you have done so is evidence that your school systems want to use standards to leverage reforms that will benefit students.

A critic might reasonably ask whether all this attention to standards is really necessary. Is it possible to provide students with a more challenging, engaging education without standards-based reform? The answer is no, and yes. Educators who believe in their students—who believe that, regardless of a student's family background or economic status or race or language, he or she is capable of performing at high levels in at least some subjects—these educators push and support their students to meet high academic standards. This has always been true, and everyone in this room can identify at least one teacher in their past who fits that

description. Standards in those days were not set down in writing, but those teachers knew what they wanted their students to know and be able to do as a result of their education. The problem was that only some teachers had such high standards, and that led to the current efforts to codify standards to guide teaching and learning for all students.

Yes, standards are essential, and they always have been. However, there is a danger that standards-based reform will become a new orthodoxy, shrouded in a language all its own, guarded by acolytes of correctness, and accompanied by rituals so complex that no ordinary teacher or administrator can make sense of them.

Keep it simple and resist the demons

Some things in education really are simple. There is no substitute for energetic, caring teachers who are excited about their subjects and who, because of their commitment to their subjects and their students, become masters of the content they teach. There is no substitute for principals and assistant principals who are not content to be building managers but have the courage to become education leaders who do whatever it takes to ensure that both adults and students in their schools perform at high levels.

There is no substitute for teachers and administrators who do not shrink from critical self-assessments of their own performance, and who relentlessly learn and apply practices that demonstrably benefit students. These people are the meat and potatoes of good education, and standards-based reforms cannot replace them or compensate for their absence. Indeed, standards make it all the more necessary for you to find and develop and support educators so they are all like this. If your school systems are not attending to this task, all your efforts to implement standards will be for naught.

Sometimes, of course, there is a chasm between what you and your school systems must do to significantly increase student performance and what you and your school systems actually do. Like all educators--indeed, like all people--you struggle with your demons, or you do not struggle enough. These demons take many forms, but the result is that you do not always do what you should do to change practices that prevent your students from performing at standard or at levels even higher than your current standards. For example, you may say that you do not know what to do, but you do not take the initiative to seek out other experiences and lessons that may be instructive. Or perhaps you know what you should do but, in the face of real or imagined bureaucratic or political constraints at the district or school level, you ask for neither permission nor forgiveness.

Then there is the three-headed demon of endless excuses, wishful thinking, and no follow-through. It is so easy to find legitimate reasons not to take action: too little time, not enough money, nobody cares as much as you do, too many other "priorities," and on and on and on. In other cases, you express good intentions, even commitments to act, but they seem to vaporize when it comes to follow-through. No matter what has been said or written or promised, little or nothing happens. There is also wishful thinking, hoping that your reforms will achieve good results, but failing to draw on your good common sense and wealth of experience as you develop implementation plans. Even though you know better than anyone how schools work and what teachers value, you do not always take that into account, implementation falters, and programs with good potential do not benefit students.

Finally, there is the demon of self-satisfaction. Because you have embraced systemic, standards-based reform more seriously than most school systems, and because you have taken major steps to bring reforms to fruition, you are leaders in this field. Maybe you feel that you have done enough, and that you should be able to

relax. The problem is that your reforms are not being measured by how innovative they are or even by how hard you have worked to implement them, but by their effects on students. Can you demonstrate that your reforms have caused significantly greater proportions of students from all demographic groups to perform at standard? Can you provide evidence that your reforms are enabling students with the greatest academic disadvantages to make achievement gains disproportionate to those of other students? Until you can, relaxing will have to wait.

Get beyond patchwork reforms

You are only at the end of the beginning of standards-based reform. Much remains to be done, and in the year ahead it is important for you to do three things.

First, build on what you have achieved to date, and learn from your mistakes. Back in 1995, your school systems established June 2001 as the date by which a specific proportion of students completing the eighth grade would perform at standard in mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies. Your school systems, not the Program for Student Achievement, established your respective performance targets, and since then one school system has amended theirs, but those targets continue to represent the goals your school systems are trying to achieve. How close will you be by next June? How far from the goals will you be, and why?

Second, reflect on, assess, and document what your school systems and middle schools accomplished between September 1995 and June 2001, and determine how you will engage internal and external audiences in dialogue about the progress you have made and what you have yet to achieve. Unless you make intentional efforts to capture your past and learn from it, you will not gain all you can from your years of experience. This is something school systems seldom do, and it is one reason they continue to make the same mistakes over and over gain, as well as fail to

sustain and build on the genuine achievements they have made. Do not let this happen to you.

Third, begin to consider, discuss, and plan for what will happen to systemic, standards-based reform in your school systems and your middle schools after your relationship with the foundation ends. When January 2002 arrives, will that be the end of your focus on making the systemic and school reforms necessary to cause young adolescents to perform at standard? Will your hard work and the momentum you have built during the previous six years simply wither away? This is usually what happens. School systems typically do not create internal or external mechanisms for the specific purpose of keeping the focus on reform and continuing to drive it forward. Can you do better? Can you push your communities, your school boards, and yourselves to consider the levels of performance that students entering the second grade this year should demonstrate by the time they leave the eighth grade in June 2007? How will your school systems and schools have to change to cause those second graders to perform at the levels you believe are necessary when they leave the eighth grade?

What you do this year to move beyond patchwork reforms to a true system of standards-based reform is important because that is what it will take for many more of your students to perform at standard. Only you can create the system of interconnected, moving-parts reforms in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development, all focused on significantly increasing student performance. Only you can attend to the meat and potatoes of good education, finding and developing caring teachers and administrators who believe that all students can perform at much higher levels and who are devoted to achieving that result. Not all of us have the knowledge it takes, or the guts, but we are here, seeking more understanding and more courage. Let us help one another, because students matter more that anyone or anything.

All Children Well

Speaking in October 2001 at the last annual gathering of educators involved with the middle grades reform through the Program for Student Achievement, Hayes Mizell reflected on the achievements of the grantee districts over the years and the continuing work of middle school reform. The audience was made up of teachers and administrators from Corpus Christi, Long Beach, and San Diego and guests from around the country.

SIX YEARS AGO, the Program for Student Achievement launched a systemic, standards-based reform initiative to improve the academic performance of middle school students. Our plan was to support a few urban school systems to implement reforms they believed would have a positive impact on the achievement of students in the middle grades. We asked the school systems to establish performance targets that would specify the proportion of eighth graders who would perform at standard in mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies by June 2001. To support the school systems in their reforms, we also provided them with some technical assistance and evaluation resources.

But we never conceived the initiative as one focused solely at the local level. We knew that across the nation the middle grades were not, generally speaking, producing satisfactory results for students. There was a pervasive culture among middle school educators that disproportionately emphasized personal support for students over developing students' knowledge and skills to a high level. It was clear to us, therefore, that the Program for Student

Achievement also needed a national focus to advocate for greater academic purpose in the middle grades. Toward this end we supported national and regional initiatives that forced this issue, raised the expectations of middle school educators, and created new resources to assist them.

This has been an intensive six years. In fact, it has been so intense that at the oddest times I find myself thinking about you, your school systems and schools, and our own efforts. Much in the popular culture seems to speak to our experience in this initiative. For example, as I was driving from Atlanta, Georgia, to Anderson, South Carolina, I heard the musician John Hiatt sing about a personal relationship that did not quite work out. The chorus says: "We were shooting for the sun; I guess the darkness finally won." That line grabbed me because there are times when it seems like an accurate distillation of our reform initiative. Yes, we were shooting for the sun, and I do not apologize for it. But no, I do not think darkness won. That is much too bleak a characterization for what has been a useful growth experience for so many educators and students.

It is true that what we asked you to do has not been easy. I know it has been and continues to be difficult for many of you. I was thinking about that as I stood in the hallway of the primate research center at Bucknell University, near an office door covered with cartoons from various magazines. One of these was by Gary Larson. In it, Rex the circus dog is under the big top, in the center ring, on a highwire, without a net, far above the upturned faces of the crowd. Rex is at the center of the wire, halfway between the platform where he started and the platform toward which he is headed. He is precariously perched on a unicycle, trying to keep his balance while peddling the unicycle. He is also holding a cat in his teeth, using two of his paws to juggle three balls; he has a clay jar on his head and a hula hoop spinning around his waist. The caption to the cartoon reads: "High above the hushed crowd, Rex

tried to remain focused. Still, he couldn't shake one nagging thought: He was an old dog and this was a new trick." I know that many times you feel like Rex, and that you wonder if you will make it to the platform at the end of the highwire or if you will fall to the center ring.

Like Rex, some of you get stuck. I thought about that as I was sitting on an airplane, waiting for it to take off, listening to the piped in music. Otis Redding was singing "(Sitting on) The Dock of the Bay," and one verse seems to come from some of your teachers and principals:

> Looks like nothin's gonna change;
> Everything still remains the same.
> I can't do what ten people tell me to do,
> So I guess I'll remain the same.

For teachers and administrators on the front lines of middle school reform, the most expedient course of action often seems "to remain the same." I think there is abundant evidence that the educators who have remained the same during the past six years have produced the least impressive results. We have emphasized throughout this initiative that effective school reform requires significant change at many different levels—institutional, professional, and personal. These changes are more difficult than the public appreciates, and the degree of difficulty is one reason reform has proceeded incrementally, with such mixed results.

I think of our shortcomings when I am in church, and this line from the Confessional strikes home: "Lord, forgive us for those things we have done that we ought not to have done, and for those things we have not done that we ought to have done." In that spirit, I apologize for the times when my words were harsh, my attitude was arrogant, and my requests were intrusive and inconsiderate. I am sorry for the times I did not listen when I should have, when I did not act when I should have, and when I was so focused on the

half empty glass that I did not celebrate the fact that it was half full.

There have been some real improvements

There is, in fact, a great deal to feel good about. Many middle school teachers and administrators in your school systems are performing at higher levels today than they were six years ago. There are at least two reasons for this. Your school systems recognize to a greater extent than they did six years ago that middle school educators need and deserve much higher quality professional development. Also, it has become clearer to you that the performance of students is directly proportional to the performance of teachers and administrators. There are still plenty of middle school educators in your school systems who have neither the skills nor the self-efficacy to prepare all students to perform at standard, but most of your school systems have recognized this problem and are demonstrating greater resolve in addressing it.

I also know that the middle level in your school systems is no longer ignored. School boards and central office staff understand that education in middle schools is just as important as in elementary and high schools. Among middle school educators there is a greater collective esprit than there was six years ago. These educators are less isolated, and within their respective school districts they frequently meet and work together to share experiences and seek to improve. Also, your middle schools are much more committed to an academic focus and are struggling to translate that focus into more substantive, deep, and engaging content and instruction.

What about the students? After all, the purpose of any reform initiative is to benefit them. As far as I know, beyond collecting, analyzing, and reporting test scores, none of your school systems makes an effort to *describe* how either individual students or groups of students perform as a result of your interventions. This is not surprising. The pressure on you is to produce "tofu data"

that on the one hand is dry and tasteless and on the other hand can absorb nearly any flavor of interpretation. It is no wonder, then, that the quantification of student performance prevails and that there continues to be so little understanding of what students *really* know and can do, or what makes a difference in their learning. I am confident that there are compelling stories in your schools of how students are responding to the challenges that standards present, and how standards-based instruction is causing them to raise their performance levels. I hope that one day your school systems will document those stories and learn from them.

We encouraged you to develop and use standards to provide a greater academic focus for the middle grades. You did that, though because we were somewhat ahead of the curve of the national standards movement, your standards were subsequently eclipsed by those that came down from the state level. Nevertheless, I believe that your engagement in developing standards was a productive experience and positioned you to respond more positively to state standards, and to understand how to use them. The standards have been one factor that has increased the academic focus of your middle schools and helped spur reforms.

We also asked you to establish student performance goals by delineating the percentage of students completing the eighth grade in 2001 who would perform at standard. This assumed that your school systems had the technical expertise to set realistic performance targets, and that the state of the art of establishing such targets was more sophisticated that it was. In addition, we had hoped that your school systems would use the performance goals, consistently and over time, to mobilize middle school educators and the community to make the reforms and provide the supports necessary for students to meet the performance goals. In other words, we hoped you would use the performance targets to hold yourselves accountable for improving student performance. On all counts we were wrong. The performance targets were neither real-

istic nor did you use them consistently to focus and motivate internal and external constituencies. Consequently, only one school system has come close to meeting its goal. In that case, the goal is linked to the state assessment—a strategic and useful approach, but not one that necessarily means that students are performing high-quality work.

Consider implementing three levels of reform

Now that you have had a taste of reform and understand how difficult it is and what it requires of you professionally, personally, and politically, what additional reforms are you committed to, for what purpose, and to achieve what results? As you think about the future, please consider how you will move forward in relation to three levels of reform.

The first level—we might call it "common sense reform"—is one with which you are familiar. These reforms are well within your reach. For example, it is a truism that the quality of a school depends to a great extent on the quality of leadership provided by the principal. Research proves it and experience demonstrates it. Yet school systems often act in ways that are contrary to what they know. They assign new principals to schools without providing strong, consistent support and oversight. They continue to expand the role of principal rather than fighting to redefine it so that instructional leadership and student performance are the priorities. They provide little or no professional development that causes principals to become deeply knowledgeable about instruction. They cough up streams of memoranda and directives, again and again sending the wrong signals about where principals should focus their energy and how they should use their time. And each year they shift principals from school to school, acting as though principals are interchangeable parts that can come and go with little consequence to schools.

Another common sense reform would be to give greater attention to the quality of the implementation of new curricula or instructional programs. Many people seem to believe that if only they select the "right" program, then teachers will implement it effectively. Experience demonstrates this is not the case. Even a quality program is only as effective as teachers' understanding of and preparation for how to implement the program to achieve the desired results. Yet school system leaders often seem to be in a "wind it up and watch it go" mode, devoting little effort and few resources to the gritty challenges of what happens when the program reaches the classroom. It is not surprising, then, that even strong curricula and programs often fail to have the effects hoped for by the people who selected them.

The second level of reform, which I call "hammer reform," consists of policies and practices that are broad in scope. Many school systems leapfrog to these second-level reforms, bypassing the first level, because in some ways they are easier to put into place. They permit school systems to avoid coming to grips with entrenched policies and practices because the second-level reforms are new. Examples of second-level reform are standards, standards-based report cards, multifaceted literacy initiatives, and grade level retention policies. School systems often use these second-level reforms as an indirect way to address first-level issues.

It has been interesting to me that none of your school systems has chosen whole-school reform, another second-level reform, as a strategy to improve persistently low-performing schools or even schools that are not among the best or the worst but could be doing much better than they are. There are now 20 or more such models, yet apparently your school systems have not seen them as potential resources for school improvement. Perhaps there are good reasons for this. You may believe that a model is too expensive, or its outcomes unimpressive, or its requirements too intrusive. Certainly none of the reform models is principal proof or teacher

proof or school culture proof. All of them require at least a modicum of will and good faith to have a chance of succeeding. Yet I think it is a mistake to ignore the potential benefits of drawing on the advances in school reform technology that have occurred during the past 15 years. If over time a school system's own interventions have proven to be ineffective, reform models are worth serious consideration as a means to prompt and support school improvement. But whether it is this approach or some other second-level reform, your school systems should continue to consider broad strategies that have potential to strengthen the performance of middle level schools.

The third level, or "big idea reform," is probably the most difficult. It represents a vision that seems to be beyond how education and political leaders think school systems should function. After many years of experience, the public education system is skilled in the mechanics of how to educate all children, but it is does *not* know how to educate *all* children *well.*

Currently, the mission of school systems is to provide a free education to all children whose families choose to send them to public schools. This is a massive and complex enterprise, helping millions of children develop knowledge and skills prescribed by the state. Most people who are now adults were educated by this public system, survived the experience, and have been able to keep themselves and their families out of poverty because of their public education. On the other hand, this system has often fallen short in educating students to levels commensurate with their native talents and abilities.

The past 35 years have seen increasing demands that public school systems make changes necessary to educate all children to higher levels. The systems have responded at a glacial pace. They are slowly learning that meeting this challenge is not just about providing more services; it is about more seriously and substan-

tively attending to the fundamentals of education: curriculum, instruction, assessment, and results.

Reform is a continuous process

How, then, do public school systems reform themselves? If their primary mission, day in and day out, is to educate all children, how do school systems learn how to educate all children *well*, and translate that learning into routine practice? The truth is that most school systems have not figured this out. They find it very difficult to provide basic education services while also learning and practicing new skills that will increase student performance. This is made all the more difficult by the fact that institutions that should help them, like higher education, are of little practical use.

It also difficult because school systems have virtually no capacity to learn and apply that learning to improve student results on a large scale. To compensate for this lack of capacity, school systems seek knowledge and expertise elsewhere by purchasing special programs, hiring consultants, contracting for technical assistance, partnering with external funders, and requiring teachers and principals to work harder and smarter. These strategies may prove to be helpful or they may produce little change, but none of them is permanent. In the end, if a school system is lucky, some of its staff know more and improve their practice as a result of their relationship with outside experts, but even then the school system has only incrementally increased its capacity.

This suggests that school systems need to come to grips with the reality that reform is a continuous process. It cannot be limited to the few years a foundation may fund it or a President may emphasize it. Turning large numbers of emergency certified teachers into productive professionals or turning large numbers of limited English proficient young adolescents into students who perform at standard is not a temporary challenge.

One possible way to address this need is for school systems to create their own research and demonstration capacity. I am not suggesting that school systems become institutions of higher education, but they do need to recognize that they are in the business of knowledge development and utilization, not just for children but for themselves. This is the only way they can develop their own capacity to understand systematically, over time, what works and does not work, and how to grow and inculcate effective practice. Using the tools of ethnography, qualitative and quantitative evaluation, project management, and even journalism, a research and demonstration office could help a school system become a true learning organization.

Whether school systems are willing to admit it or not, they are giant laboratories. Individual teachers are constantly trying new ways to help students learn better, but school systems understand almost nothing about some teachers' effective practices or how to help other teachers learn and apply them. There is an increasing wealth of student performance data that reveals which teachers are most successful with the most difficult to educate students, but school systems make little or no effort to identify those teachers and learn from them. Though unions may balk, some teachers *are* much more effective than others, and it is a waste of the valuable resource they represent not to learn from them and use that learning to shape policy and practice on a larger scale. And even though school systems invest hundreds of staff hours and large amounts of money in launching new initiatives, they make virtually no effort to assess the implementation and results of those initiatives.

A prerequisite for allocating resources, personnel, and time for research and demonstration is for school systems to develop much tougher skins. Maybe we should make this a sub-category of level three reform called "get over it!" reform. School systems not only do not try to learn systematically from what they are already doing, they resist learning that reflects negatively on their practice.

School system leaders seem congenitally unable to receive and use critical feedback, interpreting it as an assessment of their person rather than an opportunity to identify and correct problems that impede more effective performance. If these attitudes prevail, then there is no point in mounting a research and development effort because school systems are not really ready to learn. Learning is all about not getting it, screwing up, falling on your face, and trying not to make the same mistakes again. School systems, on the other hand, seem to turn a blind eye to their own experience and repeat the same fundamental mistakes over and over. Unless they are prepared to direct a research and demonstration office to root out and document the truth and nothing but the truth, and unless they want to learn from and use all the information it produces, good and bad, then school systems should not go through the charade of pretending to increase their capacity for learning.

A critical friend can increase your learning

On many occasions you have been kind enough to say how much you value the Foundation as an external critical friend. If this is true, who or what entity will be your critical friend once your relationship with the Foundation ends? As I have suggested, school systems are not known for creating or soliciting relationships with critical friends. Yet if this role has value, why not sustain it in some form?

There is potential to do so in your own communities. There may already be organizations in each of your cities clearly committed to public education and increasing its effectiveness but with enough independence to speak honestly about the school system's needs and weaknesses. Such an organization may be an advocate, maybe at times even a pain in the neck, but there is no question about its integrity and commitment to improving public education.

Perhaps your school systems are not now reaching out to these organizations because you fear more criticism. As I said, get over

it. School systems need all the friends they can get, and they should not keep their distance from some potential friends just because on occasion they might be critical. Indeed, in a true friendship each person is quite aware of the virtues and limitations of the other, and that knowledge fosters open, honest communication that strengthens the bonds between the two parties. This kind of friendship is possible between a school system and a community-based organization, but it too requires frequent communication, sharing of information and experiences, and honest dialogue. If your school system does not have a local organization that is a true critical friend, not just a slavish supporter, I encourage you to find or help develop one.

What you know is not enough

There is at least one more big idea reform you might consider. What if you reconceived the purpose of your school system as the intellectual development of both students and educators? This would not replace the basic mission of helping students develop the knowledge and skills they need to become productive and independent adults, but it would place that mission in a larger framework. If more than mere rhetoric, this approach would send the message that developing minimum skills, no matter if that minimum is higher than it once was, is not sufficient.

And what if a school system makes it clear that it expects this of teachers and administrators as well? What if your school systems said to each new teacher or principal:

> *We are glad to have you. We believe you have talents and abilities that can foster the intellectual development of this community's children. But you should be aware that we expect you also to develop intellectually. No matter how much you think you know, it is not enough. Even if you know more and are smarter than the students you teach, it is not enough. For starters, we expect that each year you will keep learning more about the content you teach and how to*

engage students more successfully in learning that content. We expect more. We expect you to engage your colleagues in figuring out how to improve classroom instruction, curriculum, assessment, and results. We expect you to seek out and test promising new ideas from your colleagues and from others outside this school system. We expect you to pursue your own new learning aggressively, and to apply what you learn to help your students perform at standard and to improve your school. We will support you, and periodically we will be interested to see how your intellectual growth is making you a more effective teacher. And by the way, if you ever have reason to believe that this school system or your school is doing anything that gets in the way of your intellectual development or that of your students, you are obligated to let us know about it. If you are not prepared to do these things, then perhaps you would be happier in another school system.

Developing the intellectual capital of your school systems' staffs will be the best investment you can make, but it will take courage to reconceive and redesign your school systems to make that happen.

As I have done on so many previous occasions, I want to conclude by reminding you why we are all engaged in this noble endeavor of reforming public schools. We are not doing it because of the competition of alternative forms of schooling, we are doing it because we know that most students in your communities depend now and will depend in the future on your school systems. Each day, parents of these students send them to your schools as an act of faith. There, their children encounter myriad relationships and experiences, some remarkably affirming and others incredibly hurtful. Somehow, most students take those relationships and experiences and learn from them and use them to become the bedrock of this nation.

There are many educators who are satisfied with this result, but I hope you are not among them. You know students who have abilities and talents their schools do not recognize or seek to discover. You know students who are satisfied with achieving the minimum because their schools establish that as the maximum. You know students whose intelligence is devalued because their teachers do not know enough to tap it. You know principals and teachers who drag themselves to school each day because they understand their job to be one of disseminating their own limited knowledge. You know that if your schools were truly performing at high levels, nearly all your students would be performing at high levels.

You have learned a lot, you have accomplished a lot, but there is much more to be done. Look toward the future and determine how you want it to be different from the past. Most of all, be resolute, be brave, be determined, be tenacious in creating school systems that serve *all* children *well.*

Part III.

Academic Standards and Accountability

According to Hayes Mizell, two key components of successful middle school reform are improving the ability of teachers to teach effectively and tracking the success of students as they learn. In the speeches that follow he cautions that "academic standards do not guarantee success." However, when coupled with professional development they can be useful tools to help ensure students move forward academically and "help schools and educators become more accountable for their results".

Is Staff Development a Smart Investment?

Speaking as a repentant school board member–one who once voted to cut staff development from his school system's budget–Hayes Mizell explains that weak practices and lack of clarity have given professional development a bad name among policymakers. He goes on to argue that staff development could be a powerful tool for reforming schools, if only educators would learn to clarify its purpose and use it effectively. Mizell delivered this address at the annual conference of the National Staff Development Council in December 1997, in Nashville, Tennessee.

I COME TO YOU THIS MORNING as a repentant former school board member. More than twenty years ago, when the school board on which I served was faced with cutting the budget, I voted to reduce funding for staff development.

In retrospect, I believe I probably did it because all I knew about staff development was that periodically teachers from throughout the district would gather in the school system's largest high school auditorium to hear a speaker, attend a few workshops, and go home. I had heard teachers complain that these meetings were not useful. I never heard that staff development improved teaching or student performance. From this perspective, I thought it was not only necessary but appropriate to reduce the school system's funding for staff development.

It was not until later in my tenure as a school board member that I learned how important effective staff development can be for

teachers. I recall a group of teachers who made a presentation to the school board, describing how they had spent the summer writing curriculum. With great excitement, the teachers told us how much it had meant to them to have uninterrupted time to work and study together and engage in deep, reflective discussions about how to strengthen the curriculum. I remember the event clearly, not only because the teachers were enthusiastic, but because it was the only such presentation I heard during my eight years as a school board member.

As I reflect on those two experiences, on the one hand voting to reduce the budget for staff development and on the other hand being impressed at the power of effective staff development, I am now painfully aware of contextual issues that I did not see or understand at the time.

If staff development had the potential to empower other teachers just as it had those who made the presentation to the school board, why didn't the superintendent, or central office staff, or the teachers' association advocate more forcefully for similar types of staff development? If large meetings of teachers passively listening to speakers were not effective means for teachers to develop the attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors they needed to be more effective, why did these meetings go on and on and on, year after year? If staff development was important, why didn't somebody tell me? Why didn't the school system act as though it was important?

The demand for reform is real

Like many people in this country, from President Clinton, to business and political leaders, to frustrated parents of every race, ethnic group, income level, and social class, I believe that public schools need to be more challenging and engaging. This is just as true for schools in advantaged suburbs as it is for schools in disadvantaged urban and rural areas. The need for reform is even more

acute, however, in schools that serve large numbers of students from low-income families or whose first language is not English. Those families depend on the public schools to educate their children well so they will read, write, and compute with a high degree of proficiency and have the self-confidence and skills to master challenging content and solve difficult problems.

Increasingly, families are exercising their power to re-*form* how they educate their children both within and outside the public schools. They aren't waiting for public schools to reform themselves; they are seeking any means necessary to provide their children with what they believe will be a better education. Within the public system, they will use legal or extralegal means to get their children into schools or classes with better reputations or select magnet or charter schools. Outside the public system they will use private schools, home schools, charter schools, or choice or private scholarship programs.

Families are no longer turning a blind eye while public schools hold their children hostage to inadequate education. This underscores the need for public schools and school systems to implement reforms that will result in better education for all children, particularly those who are most dependent on the public schools. Real reform, the reform that parents and citizens and business leaders and politicians want, results in children learning at progressively higher levels as they move through each successive grade, and children being able to demonstrate their increasing proficiency at each grade level. This is what real reform should be all about. Reform is not neat, clean, and convenient. It is not about adding another program or project to make teachers' jobs easier. It is not about protecting the privileges and prerogatives of the adults in the school. Reform is about students, all students, increasing what they know and are able to do, and demonstrating what they know and are able to do.

Reform is a human enterprise

Reform, then, means personal change. It means teachers and administrators re-*forming* what they think, what they know, and what they are able to do. This is why reform is unpopular, difficult, and slow. Reform is not something that educators do to schools or students, nor is it laws or memoranda or binders filled with curriculum materials. Reform is a human enterprise that depends on real people changing what they think, what they do, and how they do it. Meaningful school reform—that is, reform that significantly increases what students know and can do—is life altering for everyone who makes it happen and for the students who benefit from it.

Reform is hard work and often painful, but it is why staff development is so important. Staff development is one of the few positive tools school systems and schools have at their disposal to support educators who must change themselves as well as their schools and classrooms. Staff development is important because it can help educators prepare themselves and enlist the support of their colleagues to change what they think, what they do, and how they do it to benefit the education of students.

I believe this very strongly, but I wonder if staff development is up to the task of playing this role. Is staff development simply one more bureaucratic function, one more exercise of going through the motions, just another educational shell game where substance is forever elusive? Or does staff development stand apart, with a clear purpose, a focus on results, and is it accountable for achieving those results? Just how important is staff development, not as an ideal, but as a reality?

One reality is that the general public doesn't know or care much about staff development. For most parents it is a periodic inconvenience that occurs several times a year, a half or full day when their children don't attend school. Newspapers may report on school board meetings, test scores, school building construction, unusual classroom projects, discipline problems, and the occa-

sional school scandal, but there is hardly ever a story that mentions staff development.

Frustrated legislators, seeking leverage for school reform, may mandate staff development and even support it financially, but they really don't understand much about staff development or how it can help achieve the goals they seek. Rarely do they try to find out what school systems did with the resources the legislature appropriated for staff development, or what results the school systems achieved with those resources.

There's good reason to worry about the state of staff development

As an external observer, I look at staff development in practice and I worry. It would be great if staff development in every school and school system was of high quality. It would be wonderful if all staff developers had vision and knowledge. But you know and I know that is not the case. There is good reason to worry about the state of staff development in this country.

From my perspective, from the outside, it seems there is still some confusion about the purpose of staff development. For example, one school system says its staff development program is "built upon the assumption that education for all students will be enhanced by continuous growth in knowledge, skills, and commitment of all staff members in the District." Note that the program rests on an assumption, not on a belief and certainly not on research. The assumption seems to be that almost anything the school system chooses to do in the name of "continuous growth" is value added. The goal of staff development appears to be to enhance the education of students, but what does that really mean?

One state's regional educational service center defines staff development "as the totality of educational and personal experiences that contribute toward an individual's being more competent and satisfied in his/her professional role." Under this definition, it seems that staff development is everything and the desired

outcome is so broad that it provides no anchor for accountability. If staff development is everything, does it really amount to anything?

Still another school system described its goals for a specific staff development activity this way: "1. Provide a comfortable learning environment for all staff members. 2. Provide for skill development that can be used in the classroom setting." I don't know why the school system wrote the goals this way, but they seem to reflect a view that a "comfortable learning environment" takes precedence over "skill development." Nevertheless, at least these goals emphasize the importance of skill development and communicate the expectation that developing new skills has some relation to teachers' classroom performance. But why does the statement use the words "can be used in the classroom setting" rather than "will be used"? If teachers have the option of applying or not applying the skills they develop, why does the school system offer the staff development in the first place?

These examples from three different school systems illustrate the confusion about the role of staff development, confusion that I believe is widespread among educators and the public alike. In at least one state, however, the legislature does not appear to be in doubt about what it expects of staff development. In 1996, the Minnesota legislature mandated each school board to create a committee to plan for how its school system would use state funds for staff development. According to the law, each committee must "adopt a staff development plan for improving student achievement outcomes." Here is a clear, unequivocal statement of what Minnesota sees as the role of state-supported staff development. I suspect that this reflects the views of most taxpayers, not only in Minnesota but in most school systems.

The Teaching and Learning Academy of the Memphis City Schools has also adopted an exemplary mission statement: "to guide the professional growth and development of all Memphis

City Schools educators through high quality professional development experiences in effective teaching and learning, innovative leadership, and school redesign for the purpose of ensuring that all students learn to high standards." This statement not only allows no possibility of misunderstanding the purpose of staff development but offers the potential to hold staff developers and other educators accountable for the desired result.

If staff development is important, its purpose has to be clear both to educators and to the diverse publics who support staff development and make it possible. This is not yet the case, perhaps because in many school systems staff development has no focus. It is simply unclear what it is seeking to accomplish.

Who benefits from staff development?

Who should be the primary beneficiaries of staff development, staff or students? I am sure this question strikes many of you as hopelessly naïve, yet it is a central problem. You might argue that, while it is possible to organize and deliver staff development to affect the attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and skills of adults, and while one hopes that students will benefit, there can be no guarantee that students will benefit. I understand this.

What concerns me, however, is that a great deal of staff development seems intended to benefit neither adults nor students. After all, if the goal is to improve the performance of teachers and administrators, why does so much staff development ignore what we know about learning, regardless of whether the learner is a student or an adult? Why is so much staff development so ill-conceived, so hit-or-miss, so ineffective? Why do so many school systems' staff development centers pride themselves more on the breadth of their course offerings than on whether teachers become more effective leaders and instructors in their classrooms? Why do so many teachers and administrators dread staff development rather than seek it?

You may feel that this is an unfair critique. Yes, I do know that more and more schools and school systems understand what high-quality staff development is and are nurturing it. There certainly is no shortage of information about how to improve staff development, how to make it more meaningful for teachers and administrators, and how to use it to improve student learning. I am concerned, however, that high-quality staff development, intended to benefit both educators and students, is still the exception. I am concerned that staff development is a precious resource and that it is unfair to educators, students, and the public at large not to make the best use of it.

Among teachers and administrators there are still too many anecdotes about short-term, one-shot workshops led by glib presenters with transparencies where the emphasis is on the efficient sharing of information rather than learning. There are still too many staff developers scrambling during the several weeks before the opening of school to find inspirational speakers. There is still too much staff development that is not directly addressing needs of teachers and administrators that must be met if they are going to improve student performance.

Too often, the focus on student performance gets lost

The primary purpose of staff development must be to increase what students know and can do. Many people now say that "of course" students should be the ultimate beneficiaries of staff development, but the problem for me is that word "ultimate."

In most cases, the links in the chain between the process of conceiving staff development and the effects on students are too many and too weak. The focus on student performance simply gets lost in the "delivery" of staff development. This is particularly the case in schools and school systems where there is not a strong focus on improving student learning, but it also occurs even where school reform is a priority. The intentions of education leaders may

be good, but they may not give the same attention to reforming staff development that they give to accountability systems they hope will improve schools. The result is that staff development stays nestled in the cozy culture of school system operations, largely unexamined and unchanged.

Staff development does not just happen. People with authority and options make decisions about the purpose and means of staff development. If staff development is going to serve teachers, administrators, and students better, people in authority have to make different decisions. They have to decide that improving student performance will be the priority of staff development. This decision will have consequences. It will mean that staff development cannot meet the professional growth needs of all the staff. Some things are more important than others.

When only nine states require mentoring for new teachers, when students in high poverty and high minority enrollment schools have less than a 50-50 chance of getting a math or science teacher who has a license or degree in the field, and when more than 20 percent of all newly hired teachers lack the qualifications for their jobs, the need is clear. Opportunities to learn about time and stress management, the requirements of various state and federal regulations, textbook adoption, or desktop publishing are not the highest priority.

This is not to say that staff development can or should substitute for badly needed reforms in pre-service education and state certification of teachers. That is not the role of staff development. However, once teachers become employees of a school system and are responsible for educating students, the priority of staff development should be to help those teachers become as effective as they can be in the classroom. Providing opportunities for self-directed professional development is not enough. The school and school system must develop and implement coherent staff develop-

ment strategies for the explicit purpose of improving student learning.

There is a desperate need to create consensus and new professional norms among staff developers about the purpose of their enterprise, but it is also necessary to take a more critical posture about what constitutes effective and ineffective staff development. Again, staff development resources are precious, and the needs of teachers and administrators are great. The priorities must be improving principals' skills as leaders of whole-school reform and classroom instruction and expanding teachers' knowledge of the content they teach and their effectiveness in engaging students in learning that content.

Educators need to advocate effective practices and condemn weak ones

In this context, not all staff development is of equal value. For example, there seems to be broad agreement that mandated after-school workshops are, in the main, a waste of time and effort. Teachers tend to be tired at the end of the day, and the format of most after-school workshops does not promote deep engagement. Although some teachers choose to work after school in small study groups and find it valuable, many people agree that mandated after-school staff development is not the best use of staff development resources. If so, why does it continue? Why is it going on this very day in some schools, in some school districts?

Even when educators have whole days devoted to staff development, it is not unusual for the opportunity to be misused. An observer at a staff development day for faculty members from several schools recently reported the following: "Our interviews with teachers and administrators...revealed that the day's activities were only minimally helpful to them. Most said they were never aware of the purpose of each of the sessions or how the three sessions were to tie together. They had been given no overview, in

other words, of what they were to learn and be able to do as a result of the day's activities. ...Each session seemed self-contained and insufficiently developed. ...The afternoon session [at a school] had not been planned in light of the morning's work and so did not serve as a strong follow-up. Those in charge of the session said that they had not gotten instructions about how to focus the in-school session....Teachers in our sample did not feel that the day was closely connected to what they need in order to better teach their children."

I should add that this occurred in a school system that is implementing major education reforms and participates in several national reform networks. This is a school system where one would expect staff development to make sense for the teachers who participate in it. It is discouraging to learn that apparently ineffective staff development grinds on in ways that show disrespect for the needs of teachers and erode the credibility of staff development itself. Apparently these practices are acceptable because hardly anyone speaks out against them.

So long as there is no professional opprobrium for ineffective practice, it will continue, and policymakers and taxpayers will continue to think of staff development as marginal to school reform. This situation will not change until there is a broad consensus among staff developers, a consensus reflected in practice, about both the purpose of staff development and what constitutes the most effective means to achieve that purpose. It will not change until people who care about staff development not only advocate effective practices but condemn ineffective ones.

Many school districts don't know what staff development resources they have

For school systems to make the best use of their staff development resources, they need to know what resources they have and what they do with them. Many don't. There may be a staff development

line in a school system's budget, but it probably includes only allocations from local operating funds. Staff development resources may also be embedded in categorical funds, such as Title I and IDEA, and in state mandates for re-certification.

Staff development resources, in other words, may be fragmented throughout the school system, some clearly identifiable but others less so. For example, the day teachers use to attend the state education association's annual conference is a staff development resource, but school systems do not think of it that way because they do not control the content or know whether teachers participate. The effect of fragmented resources is diffuse activities with little effect.

If school boards and superintendents don't know where all the staff development resources are, how can they marshal and focus them to increase student learning? Many school systems would do well to mount an action research project designed to identify all activities in the school system one might reasonably describe as "staff development." What is the purpose, mode, and intensity of each activity? What is its source of funding? Who makes the decisions about how to allocate the resources, and who conceives and plans the staff development? What specific groups participate in each staff development activity? The answers to these and other questions should provide a "map" of the landscape of staff development in a school system, or even a school.

The system may find that its total staff development resources are greater than it thought but that decisions about those resources are made by many different people throughout the school system, not always with a common goal or a powerful effect. If staff development is truly important, then school systems and schools need to understand the total resources available in terms of money and time and use those resources wisely to improve the performance levels of teachers and administrators, a prerequisite for increasing student learning.

Evaluation can help explain the results of staff development

Staff developers can learn something from the Gospel of Mark: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times."

Like the farmer's seed, some staff development falls on good soil, but more fails to produce a crop because school systems and schools do not prepare the soil or choose a good place to put the seed. When staff development is not focused, it is difficult to evaluate its effects.

Expectations are part of the problem. Judging from the nature of much staff development, a reasonable person might ask, "Did the people responsible for this really expect it to have much effect on the participants? If so, wouldn't they have conceived the activity very differently, devoted greater care to involving representatives of the audience in its planning, and invested more effort in planning follow-up activities? Wouldn't they have designed the staff development to have a direct effect on student learning, and, from the beginning, clearly communicated that intent to the participants?"

Yet the expectations of participants are also a problem. From past experience, teachers and administrators probably know not to expect much. In most cases, they know they have the option not to participate because most staff development is voluntary. If they choose to participate they know they have the option to be passive because most staff development is not truly engaging or performance-based. Even if they participate conscientiously, they know it

is unlikely anyone in authority will ever try to determine what the participants learned or whether they ever applied what they learned. They know that, even if they do apply what they learned, no one in authority will try to assess the school and classroom effects.

In this context, where expectations about the results of staff development are so low among planners and participants alike, the absence of rigorous evaluation only aggravates the problem. If no one is asking hard questions, there is no incentive for expectations to change. I question whether staff development will ever have the impact it should unless school systems and schools, as well as researchers, become much more serious about evaluating its effects on the performance of teachers, administrators, and students. This type of evaluation will be difficult, but those who believe staff development is important have got to try.

The evaluation process will be easier if the people responsible for conceiving and planning staff development opportunities force themselves to answer certain basic questions at the outset. What do participants really need to know and be able to do to increase student learning? (The answer to this question may be different from what planners initially think participants need to know and may not necessarily even be what participants say they need.) What kind of staff development will be most effective in engaging participants in learning? What kind of staff development is most likely to cause them to apply what they learn and how will I know whether and how they applied it? What evidence will I look for and accept as indication that applying what they learned actually increased student learning? I should add that when I use the word "learn," I am referring not only to knowledge and skills but also to professional and personal insights and changes in attitude and behavior.

Good staff development needs persistent advocates

Finally, if staff development is really important, it requires visible, vocal, persistent advocates. If you believe that focused, effective, high-quality staff development can be a powerful force to increase student learning, then you need to take that message to state policymakers, school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, school site councils, teacher unions, and taxpayers. As you know, on any given day each of these groups is fully capable of acting without knowledge or understanding when it comes to staff development, much as I did more than 20 years ago. Even worse, they are capable of perpetuating ineffective staff development practices simply because that is all they have ever known.

You can change attitudes about staff development, but to do so you must make your voices heard, particularly by your bosses and your peers and by those in other school systems. You have to have the will and the courage to tell them the hard facts—that current staff development practices are not working and must be reformed if they want to improve student performance.

How important is staff development? When it comes to increasing student learning, I can think of few things more important. Whether they know it or not, the families of low-performing students are counting on staff development to help teachers engage children in significant learning. Administrators who never expected or prepared to be instructional leaders and monitors and evaluators are desperate for staff development that will improve teacher and student performance. The public, whether it knows it or not, depends on staff development to fill the gap—no, the chasm—of totally inadequate pre-service education. Even the standards movement will succeed or fail based on the ability of staff development to help teachers learn how to enable students to perform at standard. The challenges to staff development are huge, and it is an open question whether or not it is up to the task.

Academic Standards: The Beauty and Terror

In these remarks, made during a panel presentation to middle school administrators from Kansas City, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri, Hayes Mizell puts state-level academic standards into context and explains that high-quality standards can be the catalyst for a powerful chain of events in school reform. The forum was held in January 2000 and sponsored by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

TEN YEARS AGO the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation initiated a relationship with a few urban school systems to encourage and support them to reform their middle schools. We believed then and we believe now that middle schools need to have a much greater academic focus and be more academically challenging and engaging than is the case in most schools serving the middle grades.

This is not to suggest that middle schools should abandon or devote less attention to addressing students' developmental, social, and psycho-emotional needs. Indeed, no middle school can succeed if it fails to value, respect, and support young adolescents as people, and if it does not devote great efforts to developing them as students.

These roles of middle schools are complementary and interdependent, not in opposition to one another. However, it was our belief that the equation for successful middle schools was seriously out of balance. Many, many middle schools were devoting more attention to nurturing young adolescents than to creatively challenging and engaging them academically.

But the problem was even greater. There were too many middle schools that felt too good about simply being middle schools, or that devoted more effort to developing the structures and processes typically associated with middle schools than to making sure those arrangements directly benefited students. These schools seemed to care more about what Howard Johnston and Ron Williamson call the "orthodoxy of middle schools" than about whether student achievement increased and young people were developing into caring members of the school community.

By "orthodoxy," Johnston and Williamson mean unquestioning allegiance to such middle school components as teams, advisories, interdisciplinary curricula, and block scheduling. We agree that the existence of these structures and processes is less important than using them effectively as means to the end of more academically proficient students.

As we gained experience with middle schools in Baltimore, Milwaukee, Oakland, and several other cities, we learned how pervasive the problems really were. We also became aware of another related problem. Many middle schools did not have a clear academic focus because they did not have clear academic goals. It was not readily apparent what the schools wanted students to achieve academically by the end of the eighth grade. The schools could not describe what they expected all students to know and be able to do as a result of their education in the middle grades. In most cases administrators and teachers could only say that they were "preparing students for high school" or would simply refer to the school's vague and sometimes incomprehensible mission statement.

It seemed to us that if schools were unclear about the academic outcomes they wanted students to achieve, then it was no wonder that students were not striving to achieve specific academic goals or that families were not supporting the schools or the students. In other words, many middle schools were examples of the old saying: "If you don't know where you are going, any road

will do." For these reasons, we became interested in standards and supported several urban school systems to develop and use content and performance standards.

"Having standards" is not enough

On the surface, the concept of standards is simple and compelling. Content standards are broad statements of what students should know and be able to do by certain points in their academic careers. Some states and school systems delineate standards for each grade, while others establish standards only for certain grades, such as four, eight, and eleven. Performance standards define the proficiency levels students must demonstrate to indicate that they have learned what the state or school system expects. We believe that standards have the potential to help middle schools clearly delineate academic goals for students and to engage teachers, families, and even whole communities in helping students achieve those goals.

While the concept of standards is simple, experience is teaching us that in practice all standards are not created equal nor implemented with equal effectiveness. For example, although all states but one now have standards, only 44 states have promulgated standards in the four content areas of mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies. Standards make sense only if they are accompanied by assessment systems that help determine whether students can perform at standard. The most recent survey indicated that only 21 states assess whether students perform at standard in all four of the core content subjects. Forty-one states have some type of assessment for one or more subject areas, yet only 10 ask students to maintain portfolios of written projects or write extended responses to questions in subjects other than English.

Clearly, "having standards" is not enough, just as "being a middle school" is not enough. Neither ensures more effective edu-

cation or higher levels of learning. If the quality of standards matters, and it does, then Missouri and Kansas have real problems. Two ideologically opposite organizations, the "conservative" Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the "liberal" American Federation of Teachers, have separately analyzed the standards of every state that has them. The Fordham Foundation gave the Missouri standards a grade of D- in 1998 and a grade of D+ this year. It gave Kansas a grade of D- in 1998 and a C+ this year.

In these states, the standards are better in some subjects than in others. In the critical area of English (which the Missouri "Show Me Standards" calls "communication arts"), the Fordham Foundation concluded that the standards "are not specific or measurable" and "do not show increasing complexity through the grades." The American Federation of Teachers found that the Missouri standards in communication arts "do not provide the basic knowledge and skills students need to learn to develop into proficient readers and writers." The AFT further concluded that the clearest standards relate to what students should be able to do, "resulting in a heavy skills focus with little or no specific content."

This suggests that the state standards may be doing more harm than good. Under the guise of providing direction about what teachers should teach and what students should learn, the standards are misleading educators to believe that by using the standards they are doing the right thing, when in fact they are doing the wrong thing. If the Fordham Foundation and AFT analyses are correct, then the standards are fraudulent; they are not what they purport to be. Even worse, they foster teaching that ill serves students. I want to make sure you understand that not all the standards in all the subjects are this bad, but the standards I have described suggest that both Missouri and Kansas need to devote serious attention to strengthening their standards so they are more useful to educators and more productive for students.

Does this mean that standards are an inappropriate catalyst to improve middle school education. No, it means that standards must serve the needs of educators and students, rather than educators and students serving standards that have been poorly conceived and are of low quality. My advice would be that school systems take their states' inadequate standards and strengthen them through a deliberate, inclusive process that involves representatives from among principals, teachers, unions, parents, students, business people, and community-based organizations.

Ironically, low-quality state standards may give local school systems an opportunity to collaborate with their communities and engage more people in developing and understanding valid, high-quality standards than would otherwise be the case. One way or another, educators and communities need to come together and agree on what students should know and be able to do, and be comfortable and secure in the means for assessing how well students know it and can do it.

What standards can do: the beauty and the terror

Even high-quality standards will not guarantee that students will perform at higher levels. For that to happen, middle schools will also have to perform at higher levels. And middle schools can perform at higher levels only if their principals and teachers perform at higher levels as well. This is the beauty and terror of standards. They set in motion a chain of events that spark change throughout the school system.

Let us examine that chain:

- First, standards shift the emphasis from what teachers should teach to what students should learn.
- Second, for students to learn what the standards describe and to perform at the higher levels the standards set, teachers have to deepen their knowledge of their subject content and improve the effectiveness of their pedagogy.

- Third, for teachers to become more knowledgeable and effective, principals have to learn how to monitor teachers' classroom practice, guide teachers' professional development, and asses whether teachers are, in fact, causing more students to perform at standard.
- Fourth, for principals to become instructional leaders, they have to have more support from the central office, more professional development focused on instruction, and fewer bureaucratic demands.
- Fifth, for the central office to be more supportive and facilitating of reforms at the building level, and less controlling, school boards and superintendents have to be deeply committed to standards and their implementation, and they have to reallocate school system resources to prompt more high-quality, school-based staff development.

The central office also has to establish sophisticated systems of data collection and analysis, as well as qualitative evaluation, to understand which school and classroom practices most effectively cause students to perform at standard. It has to engage principals and teachers in analytical and reflective experiences that use the results of the school system's data. Finally, there is the bottom line of how the school system reports to families whether and to what extent their students are performing at standard. This will require a new report card system based less on letter grades and more on information about what students actually know and can do. When school systems use standards as this kind of linchpin of reform, it can provide focus and coherence that are currently lacking.

Teachers' beliefs will need to change

You will want to know whether there is a school system that has all of these elements in place, and the answer is "of course not." Very few school systems are really serious about either the middle grades, student achievement, or standards. The few that are

serious about all three are finding that there is a massive job to do in changing teachers' beliefs and attitudes, as well as their skills. Because the challenge of standards is that all students will perform at significantly higher levels, teachers have to believe that all students can potentially do so, and that teachers can cause that result. This is counter to the beliefs of many teachers.

One way, and it is only one way, some schools are addressing this problem is to engage teachers systematically and consistently in analyzing student work. While this can operate in many different ways, in its simplest form it involves a small group of subject area teachers meeting regularly and sharing with each other examples of their students' work. The teachers do not share their students best work but rather a collection that represents the full range of performance levels.

The teachers use a common rubric to review, assess, and discuss the students' work and even the assignments that prompted it. In most cases, this process quickly reveals that the teachers have their own "internal standards" that cause them to grade student work differently. They begin to understand that, by using standards-based assignments and standards-based rubrics, they can improve the quality of students' work and accelerate their progress toward performing at standard.

In this way, the teachers support each other, share critical feedback, and collectively advance their professional development, all within the context of their students' actual performance. This process of analyzing student work also has the benefit of providing teachers with immediate feedback as they begin to alter their practice; it can increase their self-efficacy as they see that changing their practice in certain ways can improve their students' performance.

There are many, many challenges in standards-based reform, and these challenges are both exciting and scary. They require a

great deal of will and a relentless determination to find, try, and refine more effective practices, and to evaluate, evaluate, evaluate whether the application of those practices cause students to perform at standard. For too long, too many middle schools and their students have focused on surviving the middle grades. Now it is time for all members of the middle school community–administrators, teachers, and students–to focus on improving their performance to bring students to higher levels of achievement.

Watching for Mr. Hyde

State policies regarding academic standards have both good elements and bad, especially for vulnerable students, who stand to benefit most from better schools but also bear much of the burden of current accountability policies. At a forum sponsored by the National Dropout Prevention Center Network in February 2000, Mizell argued that it is too early to judge the overall impact of states' efforts.

BY NOW, NEARLY EVERYONE has heard of "the standards movement." I assume most of you are here because you are concerned about standards, how states and school systems are using them, and their effects on vulnerable students. I want to be clear from the outset that I believe standards can benefit the students all of us care about, those who have been written off too often by their schools as unmotivated, untalented, and even uneducable. Those benefits will be achieved, however, only if states and school systems use standards to improve the performance of teachers and principals, not just the performance of students.

Let me explain. As a concept, standards are easy to understand. They are simply statements, usually broad statements, of what students should know and be able to do as a result of their schooling. Standards are attempts to describe both the knowledge students should acquire and how students should apply that knowledge.

I hope we can agree that this development is long overdue. For many, many years, students and their families have been unclear about what students should be learning, particularly when students get beyond elementary school. If a parent enrolled their child

in the sixth grade and asked the principal, "What can I reasonably expect my child to know and be able to do by the time she completes the eighth grade?" most school administrators could not answer that question. Even though 49 states have now developed academic standards and expect school systems and schools to use them, it would be interesting to know how many principals could answer that question even today.

The purpose of content standards is to define and disseminate a common set of educational expectations for all students. This differs dramatically from past practice. For many years, it was individual teachers who determined what students should know and be able to do. Teachers used textbooks in ways that made them, *de facto*, the standards. Whatever the textbook included, or whatever portion of the textbook the teacher covered during a school year, represented what the teacher expected students to learn.

The old system was rigged against students

The problem with this approach was not only that different teachers in different school systems used different textbooks of different quality, but also that the teachers covered different amounts of material in different degrees of depth. One social studies teacher might spend six weeks on the Civil War because he liked the Civil War, while another teacher might devote six weeks to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson because she thought they were important. In other words, there was no consensus about what it was important for students to know and be able to do.

This continued even after school systems emphasized curriculum development and states disseminated curriculum frameworks. Compounding the problem was that, regardless of the subject content teachers taught, they used different criteria for assessing student performance. The letter or numerical grade they awarded was based on criteria known only to the teacher. One teacher of low-performing students might choose to give them satisfactory

grades because they had tried hard or turned in their assignments on time, even if their work was otherwise unsatisfactory. Another teacher of the same students might choose to place greater emphasis on the quality of the students' work. As a result, the second teacher might give the students a lower grade than the first teacher. Alternately, the second teacher might use the students' unsatisfactory work as the basis for reteaching the lesson on which the she based the assignment, then provide additional opportunities for the students to demonstrate what they had learned.

The variations in what teachers taught and the criteria they used to determine if students had learned it demonstrated to many students that the educational process was a rigged system. Students did not know what they were supposed to learn. They did not know whether what they were learning was comparable to what other students in other places were learning. They did not know what represented quality work.

This was a system that did not provide clear academic goals, and in some students it produced enough frustration and anger to lead them to drop out of school. Quite literally, they could not figure out how schools worked, or why the educational process was so cloaked in mystery. The system also worked to the great disadvantage of students whose families lacked the knowledge, power, confidence, or options to compensate for and overcome these obstacles.

Other families who were more advantaged worked to get their children into classrooms and schools with teachers who had high internal standards. These were teachers with high expectations for what students should learn, who challenged students to master difficult content, and who demanded high levels of student performance. The purpose of standards, therefore, should be to level the playing the field so that all students are participating in a fair and equitable educational process.

This is why at the beginning of each school year, the Corpus Christi, Texas, school system publishes and sends to the families of every student a booklet setting forth the standards for the core subjects at every grade level. This is why the Corpus Christi school system is also using a standards-based report card that focuses teachers' instruction on helping students perform at standard and helps families understand students' progress toward meeting the standards. This is why more teachers are using rubrics that set forth specific criteria for assessing the quality of all students' work, and why some teachers are also engaging students in developing the rubrics so they know and understand the grading criteria.

There are two ways of thinking about and using standards

My description of standards may surprise you. You may be wondering why I have said nothing about standards as they are so often described by the news media, policymakers, and politicians. I have not done so, in part, because standards are about much more than scores on tests. I want you to understand that there are, in effect, two ways of thinking about and using standards. Think of them as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, or to paraphrase the slogan from the Broadway show, "It's a fine line between good policy and bad." Standards as I have described them are like Dr. Jekyll—gentle, intellectual, and risk-taking. Standards as many people talk about them are like Mr. Hyde—menacing and dangerous.

The latter incarnation can be seductive to policymakers, who begin with the assumption that it is necessary to tell educators what they should teach and what students should learn. To date, it appears that policymakers and politicians are more interested in using standards as a club for compliance than as a light toward better teaching and learning. It seems that toughness is the value they want to communicate, apparently assuming that it is possible to force educators and students into higher levels of performance.

It would be a mistake to believe that these trends have come to an end, or will do so in the near future.

One can find many things wrong with the standards movement. Each component has its Jekyll and Hyde features. Standards can provide useful direction for what all teachers should teach and all students should learn, but standards may be difficult for teachers to understand, or teachers may not know how to use them effectively, or the standards may not be sufficiently challenging. Tests should provide useful information about students' progress toward performing at standard, but they may not be aligned to the standards or they may emphasize convenience of administration and scoring over assessment of students' authentic performance. Accountability systems should cause educators and students to take the standards seriously, but they may impose such high stakes that they distort the educational process and cause educators to focus more on preparing students for the test than on engaging them in deeper, more challenging learning experiences.

Yes, it is true that many students and families have not taken education and tests as seriously as they should, and there is merit in accountability systems that focus students on taking greater advantage of educational opportunities. It is also true that in many school systems the accountability systems have had the effect of causing states and schools to pay much more attention to low-performing students. Twenty-nine states have intervention programs that target funds specifically to assist students who have difficulty making progress toward performing at standard.

Almost entirely due to the standards and the accountability systems, many schools now provide additional time and support for struggling students. The modes for doing so include zero periods, after school programs, Saturday school, standards-based summer school, and tutoring. This is in sharp contrast to the recent past when schools did not hesitate to promote students to

the next grade even though they were functioning at unacceptable levels of academic proficiency.

However, as far as I know, no one is documenting whether the scope or intensity of these interventions is adequate to serve all the students who need them, or whether students who participate in the interventions subsequently go on to perform at standard, remain in school, and graduate. We also need to know much more about which interventions are most effective in addressing which needs of which students.

School systems are not routinely collecting, analyzing and publishing this information, and few newspapers are covering this dimension of the standards-testing-accountability story. In spite of the positive effects of the interventions, too many standards-based accountability systems place the burden to perform primarily on students, without comparable burdens falling on schools. If students do not perform satisfactorily on the state tests, the consequences are swift and powerful; the students may not move on to the next grade or graduate.

For those schools where many students do not perform satisfactorily, there may be consequences, but they are likely to be more indirect. The school's test scores or ranking on the state performance index may be published in the newspaper, or the school may be placed on the state's watch list, or it may be visited by a technical assistance team from the state department of education, or perhaps the school system will remove the school's principal. Rarely, however, does the school experience the same pressures as students to improve performance in the near term. Students who do not perform at standard are not promoted, but teachers who do not perform at the levels necessary to cause students to perform at standard continue to teach much as they have in the past, with the same results.

Educators must be as accountable as students

This is where the Dr. Jekyll of standards becomes the Mr. Hyde. Students who have difficulty performing at standard are not likely to do better unless their teachers become more knowledgeable about and comfortable with the content they teach, and much more skillful in engaging students in learning that content. Yet the rhetoric and accountability measures that accompany standards emphasize that it is students who must reform their attitudes, behaviors, motivation, and use of time. Of course, it is easy to take this position because students have no voice and no power—and, in fact, many students should take their education more seriously.

But educators need to reform their attitudes and behaviors as well. They need to take initiative to master the content they teach and learn and use more effective pedagogy. They need to take initiative to structure their schools to develop closer and more supportive relationships with their students, to create more time for student learning in the core content subjects, and to collaborate with their colleagues in high quality staff development at the school site. They need to take initiative to identify, adapt, and apply the experiences of other schools that are succeeding in spite of demographic factors that usually correlate with low achievement. Students are not the only ones who have to change.

The fact that educators are so slow to reform their practice is not entirely their fault. Policymakers are quick to enact laws and regulations telling educators what to do, but they devote little attention and money to helping educators learn how to do it. Policymakers know they want a different result from the educational process, and they are right to expect it, but they have not demonstrated much sensitivity to the changes educators must make to achieve that result.

Implementing standards, for example, is not simply a matter of following new guidelines about what to teach, or posting standards on the classroom wall. Teachers have to understand the standards,

truly understand them, and make them their own. Teachers have to believe, truly believe, that with their help nearly all their students can eventually meet the standards. They have to throw out old curricula that are not standards-based and do not help students develop the knowledge and skills they need to perform at standard. Teachers then have to develop or select new curricula that help students achieve that goal. They have to learn how to develop lessons and assignments tightly linked to the standards, and how to develop and use rubrics to improve the quality of students' work. Teachers have to become more skilled in assessing each student's performance for the specific purpose of obtaining data that will inform both the teacher and the student about the student's progress toward achieving the standards.

None of this is easy; nor does it come naturally to educators. It requires time, support, and consistent effort. Yet policymakers do not explicitly expect educators to develop those skills, nor do they provide the resources and oversight to encourage them to do so. They leave it to educators to figure it out for themselves.

The result is predictable: educators are resentful. They ignore standards and take their chances with the accountability system, placing most of the burden on students. They grow more discouraged and resistant to change, even if they know change is necessary. Where does that leave us? It seems that standards are here to stay, as they should be. Thoughtfully conceived, conscientiously implemented, and carefully evaluated, they can benefit students and education. But those three modifiers—thoughtful, conscientious, careful—do not describe the policy or political environment in which most educators operate. What begins as Dr. Jekyll often turns into Mr. Hyde.

It's time to put the standards movement to the test

We have yet to see whether the standards movement will help or harm public education, but I believe that we should not yet reject

or condemn it. What we need to do, it seems to me, is subject the standards movement to the ultimate assessment by seeking answers to these questions:

- Are there growing numbers of schools and school systems where students move out of the bottom achievement quartile each year in ever-increasing proportions?
- Is an increasing percentage of the eighth grade cohort remaining in school and completing twelfth grade?
- Are eighth graders passing challenging, standards-based state tests and going on to enroll in stimulating high school courses that lead to post-secondary education?
- Are more students at all grade levels passing standards-based assessments, and are fewer students retained in grade or participating in special intervention programs?
- Are schools changing to challenge all students, even those scoring at the 80th percentile and above, to perform at higher levels?
- Are communities and school systems holding principals and teachers accountable, as well as students, to learn more and apply what they learn more effectively?
- Are policymakers at national, state, and local levels devoting more effort to increasing educators' capacities to cause students to perform at standard?
- Are schools becoming much more sophisticated in understanding and increasing the authentic performance levels of their students, and much less terrified of the state test?
- Are improvements in all these areas happening steadily, each and every year?

When there is ample evidence to answer these questions in the affirmative, we will know that the standards movement is producing results commensurate with its potential. In the meantime, remember that the voice of students is still missing at the tables

where policy is made. It is important to collect, analyze, and report quantitative, qualitative, and even anecdotal information about the effects of standards on all students, particularly those at the academic and social margins of schools, and then bring that information to the attention of school board members and state legislators.

We can be hopeful that the standards movement will benefit students, but we must watch for Mr. Hyde.

What If There Were No State Test?

If the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) were to disappear tomorrow, what would happen to schools' accountability for student achievement? Hayes Mizell suggests that if schools and school districts would embrace the elements of "self-accountability," they could stop worrying about test scores and focus entirely on their own goals for student achievement. He presented these reflections in March 2000 to a group of central office staff, principals, teachers, and teacher union representatives from the Corpus Christi Independent School District.

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, I was at a meeting where there was a lively dialogue between the superintendent of a small Texas school system and a nationally prominent education researcher. The researcher was critical of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) because in his view it is driving teachers to focus on relatively unchallenging knowledge and skill development. The superintendent, on the other hand, was from a school system that had made remarkable progress in closing the gap between the TAAS scores of Anglo, Hispanic, and African-American students.

The superintendent conceded that the influence of TAAS has not been entirely positive. But, he said, the test, in combination with the state's accountability system, has caused school systems to become more concerned about improving the academic performance of all students in all achievement quartiles. He argued that TAAS will be revised and become more challenging, and that it has already succeeded in shaking school systems out of their compla-

cent acceptance of poor academic performance by students from low-income, Hispanic, and African-American families.

This superintendent was being very honest. He could afford to be. The longitudinal TAAS data for his school system document that the achievement of students whose demographic characteristics usually correlate with poor academic performance is now comparable with students who traditionally score at higher levels. To his credit, the superintendent was admitting that, before TAAS, his school system was not paying much attention to how well it educated low-performing students. He was also saying that his school system has recognized the error of its ways, that it now expects the same high levels of performance from all students and is doing all it can to help every student meet those expectations. Its success in doing so is manifest in TAAS scores that show similar performance among all demographic groups.

Of course, the superintendent's admission also had a worrisome aspect. He implied that it is *because* of TAAS that schools in his community are doing what they should have been doing all along—taking whatever actions are necessary to improve significantly the academic performance of low-achieving students.

Schools are accountable to whom?

The superintendent's comments caused me to think, "What if there were no TAAS?" What if the influence and pressure of the Texas accountability and assessment system suddenly vanished? Would his school system, and others that have been prompted to devote more attention and effort to the education of low-performing students, simply revert to their former postures of benign neglect? If such backsliding is a real danger, what does it say about the professionalism of the school system's administrators and teachers? To whom do these educators feel they are most accountable: the State of Texas, or themselves as professionals and the students they see every day?

These are questions that all administrators and teachers who work in an environment of high-stakes testing should ponder. If we can agree that educating nearly all students to achieve at comparable, high levels is important, and if we can agree that not all school systems, schools, and educators are, in fact, taking whatever actions are necessary to achieve that result, then is it only external pressures that will cause them to do so?

Obviously, many people believe this to be the case. Over time, state legislatures have created accountability and assessment systems because in their experience school systems have been too tolerant of low levels of performance among both educators and students. These policymakers have seen little evidence that school systems, schools, and educators are changing to achieve higher levels of performance by both adults and young people. These systems are only one source of the external pressure for accountability that public schools are currently experiencing. As you know, one of the strong arguments for vouchers, charter schools, and private scholarship programs is that they will shake public school educators awake and cause them to make changes necessary to educate all students more effectively, but particularly those who have no other education options.

Whether external state interventions will have their desired effect remains to be seen, but high-stakes testing and punitive state sanctions will never recede if, over time, they prove to be powerful forces for causing educators to raise levels of student performance. Schools will be free of these external pressures only when there is compelling evidence that the interventions are no longer necessary, or are ineffective, or are no longer politically viable. The state accountability system will become irrelevant only when school board members, administrators, and teachers measure their success not by being told by the state that their schools are "exemplary," "recognized," "acceptable," or "low-per-

forming," but by holding themselves accountable for proving that their students consistently demonstrate high levels of proficiency.

Will educators ever do the right thing for the right reasons?

Whether this day will ever come is very much in doubt. We have reached a sad state of affairs when educators do the right thing not because they understand and act on what they know must be done, but because the state establishes and enforces thresholds of satisfactory performance. Curiously, nearly all of these educators are also parents. Few of them would say they are raising their own children to do the right thing only when they are being watched and judged by someone in authority. Most would say they want their children to develop internal standards of ethics and morality so will they do the right thing even if no adult is around. These educators would say that they want their own children to do their best and rise to the challenges of life because they have high expectations for themselves.

Yet in their professional lives, many of these educators settle for less than second best. Most of them are good people. They work hard. They are honest and trustworthy. They get along with their colleagues. They try to do what their supervisors and colleagues expect of them. But they are not self-critical. They seldom recognize gaps in their knowledge or face up to deficiencies in their pedagogy, both of which have a direct impact on the learning of their students. They too often wait for someone else to set the expectations and standards. They resist judging their own performance by the performance of their students.

These educators wait for their students and their school to be held accountable annually by the state, rather than holding themselves accountable throughout the year. They work hard and hope for better results, but they shrink from the focus and discipline required to assess and strengthen the linkage between their practice and how their students perform.

I know that the culture of external accountability and assessment, as well as local educators' longstanding personal and professional relationships, can make it very difficult to begin to shift the locus of accountability. But what if there were no TAAS? What levels of student and school performance would educators expect of themselves? How would they know—how would they *really* know, with greater certainty and depth of understanding than TAAS can determine—the authentic performance levels of their students and schools? How would they forcefully document and clearly communicate to other audiences, including the state, what their students authentically know and can do? And how would they hold themselves and their schools accountable for making the professional and institutional changes necessary to cause nearly all students, particularly those who are far behind, to perform at the mastery level?

These are difficult questions, but if educators are serious about being professionals, if they want to take control of their own destiny and that of their schools, and if they see themselves not as victims but as potentially powerful agents for change, then these are the types of questions they will have to consider.

Self-accountability is a process

No roadmap will help you begin the process of self-accountability. That is part of the challenge. There are, however, some essential elements for holding yourselves and your schools accountable.

The first is ***acceptance of responsibility***. If a school is going to hold itself more accountable for student performance, it has to accept responsibility for doing so. A school has to proclaim its role in the equation of factors that contribute to student achievement; it has to recognize that, although personal, home, and community factors affect student performance, it expects more of itself than it does of any other entity. Student performance is not an accident or aberration, it is a consequence of the school's actions and teachers'

instruction. In the self-accountable school, administrators and teachers know this and embrace it; they do not make excuses. The school establishes high standards of performance for its administrators and teachers, putting the academic needs of students above the personal convenience and prerogatives of the school's adults, and it takes responsibility for school staff who do not meet the school's performance standards.

The second element is ***shared responsibility***. Self-accountability is not something the principal can impose on a faculty. It is not something a faculty can achieve without the principal. There has to be consensus among a school's administrators and teachers that they want to work together to demonstrate that they expect more of their students' performance than does the state, that they know more about their students' performance levels than does the state, and that they can more convincingly confirm what their students know and can do than can the state. There also has to be shared distribution of work and answering for results, or the lack of them.

The third element is ***initiative and inquiry***. There is no point in a school seeking to hold itself more accountable if it does not intend to be more aggressive about determining which of its operations, structures, and practices must change. The school does not assume that it has nothing to learn. To the contrary, it assumes that someone, somewhere, is addressing the same problem or issue and doing it much more effectively.

The fourth element is ***assessment***. For schools to hold themselves truly accountable they will have to use means other than the state test to assess whether students are progressing toward meeting the school's own high standards. The goal is not to invent a new test; it is to understand more about students' authentic performance than one can learn from the state test results. What do students really know, and what can they do? How well can they apply what they have learned to new and challenging problems, presented in different contexts? The most obvious means of assess-

ment is the collaboration among teachers to analyze student work frequently and systematically.

The fifth component is ***full disclosure***. To be more accountable, schools must be forthcoming and open about the performance of their students. Schools could have internet sites that clearly describe and interpret all their most recent student performance data. But in school systems where many families do not have computers or internet access, schools will have to develop other means to document and explain students' authentic performance. Are schools prepared to cover their walls with student work clearly linked to standards and rubrics, and to update those displays throughout the school year? Will the posted student work show the evolution of student writing from one draft to the next, until the final draft represents high-quality performance? Are schools prepared to use their newsletters to share information, in ways that make sense to families, about students' authentic performance?

One purpose of standards is to take the mystery out of learning. Another is accountability for making information about student performance transparent and pervasive throughout the school community. Few schools do this; indeed, most schools treat student performance data as if it were a ticking bomb, not a tool for understanding the learning needs of both students and teachers.

The sixth element is ***professional development***. There is no question that it is scary for schools to hold themselves accountable. When they do so, they boldly claim responsibility for student performance and commit themselves to taking whatever steps are necessary to cause their students to perform at much higher levels. One such step is making sure that teachers are confident in their knowledge of the subjects they teach and have the skills to weave together curriculum and pedagogy so that students want to learn and can learn what they need to know to perform at the mastery level. Some teachers have the knowledge but not the instructional

skills. Others relate well to their students but have only a barely adequate grasp of their subjects. Still others strike out on both counts.

In any of these cases, it is difficult for teachers to step forward and admit that they need help. Most school cultures do not expect, encourage or support teachers to identify their learning needs, nor do they take the initiative to ensure that teachers participate in and benefit from appropriate staff development. There is no better investment a school or school system can make than to increase the capacity of its teachers to meet the instructional challenges they face each day. Yet in most schools, staff development is a sometime thing, often inappropriate to the specific learning needs of specific teachers and lacking the intensity and follow-up necessary to produce significant changes in student performance.

Any school that wants to hold itself accountable for student performance has to spend time analyzing and understanding what its teachers and administrators need to learn in order to help their students learn. It has to provide the context and support that cause educators to develop, practice, refine, and apply the knowledge and skills they need to increase student performance.

The seventh element of self-accountability is ***central office support***. It is doubtful that schools will take the risks necessary to hold themselves more accountable if the school board, the superintendent, and the central office send explicit and implicit signals that what matters most is performance on the state test. State accountability and assessment systems will not go away, and by now everyone is aware of their consequences. But is satisfactory student performance on the state test the purpose of public education in a community, or is it one indicator of the effectiveness of that education?

School system leaders need to keep the state test in perspective, but at the same time demand that schools take responsibility for presenting compelling evidence of what their students know

and can do, and for using that information to implement personal and institutional reforms that improve those results. It is essential for school system leaders to raise and defend the banner of higher levels of performance for all students and provide schools support that enables them to hold themselves accountable. First, however, those leaders have to be clear about the evidence of higher performance that really counts.

The final component of self-accountability is ***take whatever actions are necessary to improve student performance.*** This may be the most difficult task for schools and school systems. You are familiar with the litany of excuses schools use to avoid taking actions they know are necessary to increase student achievement: "Mr. Jones is not a very good math teacher but he has been here a long time and, well, you know how it is." "The teachers who need to participate in staff development will not volunteer for it." "We have so much turnover in our faculty that there is no opportunity for us to develop a stable school culture." "We just do not have time." "We have a group of teachers that do not want to do anything new; they have seen so many initiatives come and go that they are completely cynical." "If we try to do that we will get in trouble with the union." And of course: "We are doing the best we can, but we have all these poor and minority and limited English proficient kids, and they always perform poorly on tests."

I take these excuses seriously. They are rooted in real experiences and real concerns. They also portray the school as a static, adult-centered institution, powerless to take itself in hand and make changes necessary to increase the performance of all students. So long as these excuses prevail, so long as they are more powerful than principals' and teachers' acting on what they know is the right thing to do, reform can come only through the kinds of external pressure represented by the state test and by vouchers, charter schools, and private scholarship programs.

There is no real hope for self-accountability unless principals and teachers are willing to take whatever actions are necessary to increase their students' performance. This will mean inconvenience. It may mean conflict. It will certainly mean entering a zone of new and perhaps uncomfortable experiences. It will also mean getting serious, truly serious, about the education and performance of low-achieving students, not just hoping that implementing any good idea will improve results.

Educators are facing a professional choice

By this time I have painted such a daunting picture of self-accountability that you may be thinking to yourselves, "I've got enough problems. This is not for me." Perhaps I am, as if often the case, too optimistic about what principals and teachers can do. But I believe educators are facing a choice. Teachers and administrators can either demonstrate that they can cause students to learn at such high levels that the state test is almost irrelevant, or they can continue to define their roles, their students' education, and their schools in terms of student performance on the state test. I suppose the latter is fine for educators who merely want a job and are content to more or less do what the job requires. But I cannot understand how educators who think of themselves as professionals, as people with integrity, high standards of performance, imagination, and a strong commitment to their students, can allow themselves, their students, and their schools to be defined by the state test.

Until the teachers and administrators who think of themselves as professionals decide to set and bring to fruition an agenda of true high performance for their schools, and until the result is demonstrable deep learning and the compelling application of that learning, then educators' protests about state accountability and assessment systems will have little credibility.

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What if there were no state test? Would your schools breathe a sigh of relief, not because they would no longer have to put up with the logistics of the testing but because they would no longer be subject to pressures for their students to perform well on the test? Would there be any guiding star, any pressure for making changes necessary for nearly all students to perform at high levels? Would schools have any credible process for holding themselves accountable for high levels of student performance?

Perhaps we will never know the answers to these questions because state tests and accountability systems, or some versions of them, may always be with us. They probably will be, until schools hold themselves so accountable that nearly all students perform at high levels.

Professional Development: The State It's In

Nearly every state has adopted academic standards, yet few have given real thought to the role staff development must play if students are to meet the new demands. Speaking at a meeting for administrators from approximately 40 state education agencies, Hayes Mizell suggested five actions states can take to implement effective staff development to build the skills of teachers and principals. The meeting, sponsored by the National Staff Development Council, was held in Dallas in February 2001.

WHAT IS A STATE TO DO? What is a state to do?

In response to rising public concern about the academic performance of students attending schools financed by state and local taxes, policymakers have enacted a host of laws and regulations to improve public education. They have mandated standards with the intention that teachers will align their curricula and instruction with what the state believes students should know and be able to do. They have mandated frequent assessment of students to determine whether students are, in fact, making satisfactory progress toward performing at levels the state considers proficient.

State policymakers have gone even further, allocating millions of tax dollars to develop and score tests that give teeth to the assessment mandates. Believing that testing means very little in and of itself, states have used test results to hold school systems, schools, and students accountable. They have created and used a wide range of sanctions when school systems, schools, and students fall short of expectations.

Of course, students– people who do not vote, or pay taxes, or belong to professional associations with lobbyists– have borne the brunt of demands for accountability. Students who fail to meet the states' standards for academic performance are retained in grade, or required to attend summer school, or scheduled into classes that last twice as long as regular classes.

This is not to say that teachers and administrators do not also experience the state's pressure. Their students' test results are published in local newspapers and posted on the internet. A persistently low-performing school may be the ambivalent recipient of technical assistance from a team of educators organized by the state education agency. If that school's students continue to demonstrate unsatisfactory performance on the state test, its school system may reconstitute the school, providing it with a new principal and faculty, or close the school altogether.

Some states even create escape hatches for students who attend a low-performing school only because they are unlucky enough to reside in its attendance area. In those situations, parents may choose to enroll their children in another school with a more satisfactory record of student performance.

Policymakers have missed two-thirds of the story

A decade ago, it would have difficult to imagine this range of state actions. They emerged because policymakers became frustrated with the cycle of excuses and promises used by school systems to explain poor student performance, and by reforms that produced only marginally improved results. Unfortunately, the policymakers focused on only one-third of the phenomena responsible for schools' mediocre, or worse, records. They understood that many teachers and administrators did not recognize the need to change their expectations, knowledge, skills, and behaviors to improve student performance, and that these educators demonstrated little

interest in making the necessary changes in their professional practice.

What policymakers did not understand was that, at the same time, their states and the federal government were imposing a new expectation on educators and students, the expectation that all students—not just "some" or "many" or "most," but *all* students—should perform at basic and then at increasingly higher levels. "All" means students who do not speak English when they come to school, or whose parents attained only a few years of formal education. "All" means students who come from low-income homes, or perhaps have no homes. "All" means students whom educators do not perceive to be motivated, gifted, or talented. "All" means students with extraordinary emotional and developmental needs. This emerging expectation, whether explicit or implicit, was a new and radical challenge for educators, but most policymakers did not recognize it. They simply made laws and regulations assuming that the educators who would carry them out would do so with students who were little different from the policymakers' classmates decades ago.

The other phenomenon the policymakers did not understand, or at least seldom acknowledged, was that teachers and administrators were woefully ill-prepared to meet the challenges of educating all students to perform at basic and then at higher levels. The policymakers assumed that educators could understand and implement new mandates, and change their practice accordingly, as fast as the policymakers could churn out the new directives. This was not and is not the case. Teachers and administrators had the expectations, knowledge, skills, and behaviors to perform at levels that had passed for satisfactory in years past. They did not, however, know what to do or how to do it to enable all students to perform at basic and higher levels. In other words, policymakers focused on educators' reluctance to improve and created policies and allocated resources to force them to do so. But they did not appreciate the

classroom realities confronting the educators charged with meeting the policymakers' expectations.

They did not address the teachers' and administrators' lack of capacity to change in order to help all students perform at basic and higher levels. Even now, only a few states can point to notable success in significantly raising the performance levels not only of students, but of teachers and administrators as well. Only time will tell whether the combination of state-mandated assessments, accountability, and interventions will be powerful enough to increase significantly what students, teachers, and administrators know and can do.

Can states make professional development more effective?

Today, we have a great opportunity and responsibility to make professional development as helpful and effective as it can be. Education policy tends to be more like hospitalization than like administering a vaccine. The role of staff development is not to treat the sick, but to prevent the illness of professional stagnation and crippling practice. Staff development can fulfill this role if states reflect on and learn from their own successes and failures in developing and implementing other policies to improve education. I would like to suggest five courses of action that states might take:

- *First, states should focus on the relationship between professional development and student performance.* Policymakers, school systems, and schools must understand that, to achieve specific results in student performance, educators must design and evaluate staff development for the purpose of achieving those results. The tighter the links between the content and process of staff development and the desired performance of students, the more likely it is that educators' practice will produce results that benefit all students. This is common sense, but judging from the professional development that

some states fund, it is a concept foreign to many school systems and schools. The only remedy is to educate superintendents, principals, and teachers that the state values and insists on staff development for the specific purpose of increasing student performance, and that this staff development will receive priority for state funding and approval of applications for federal funds.

- *Second, states should insist that school systems and schools document how state-funded professional development has or has not improved the day-to-day practice of teachers and administrators.* Without such accountability, most educators will continue to regard staff development as an event rather than as a rippling sequence of activities and actions that culminate intentionally in demonstrably improved performance of teachers and administrators. Changing the existing mental model for staff development will be difficult, but one way to do so is to require district and school leaders responsible for professional development to describe its effects on educators' practice.

- *Third, states should establish criteria for what constitutes effective, results-based staff development that merits state funding.* The greatest obstacle states face in increasing the knowledge and skills of educators is that most local administrators either do not know what high quality staff development is, or they do not apply what they know when they make decisions that shape professional development. It is unlikely that the quality of staff development will improve unless local educators learn how to distinguish potentially effective professional development from that which is almost certainly misdirected and wasteful of state resources. The experience and research base to do so already exist. All that is necessary is for

states to understand that staff development is at the center, not the periphery, of school reform and to act accordingly.

- *Fourth, states have to abandon policies and practices that model or affirm ineffective staff development.* When a state abruptly calls a meeting of local educators for a one-day training session on some state or federal regulation, it communicates that a similar approach is appropriate for local school systems. The unintended message is that what really counts is authority and chain of command, not respect for the time and priorities of the training participants, not what is learned, and not whether the training helps participants subsequently apply what they learn. And when states structure their professional development policies around course credits or hours of participation, with little or no regard for what educators need to know and be able to do to increase student achievement, what does it say to local educators? It says that staff development is a hollow, mechanistic exercise that creates the illusion that professional growth is occurring, but with little expectation that either educators' practice or students' performance will improve as a result. If states are going to expect school systems and schools to take staff development seriously, states must lead the way by demonstrating what high-quality professional development looks like and developing practical policies that emphasize results rather than process.

- *Fifth, states have to know whether the staff development they fund is reducing gaps in student achievement.* Does professional development increase the proportion of students who enter the middle grades with adequate computational and literacy skills? To what extent does staff development enable teachers at the middle level to address the learning deficits of students who come to them performing one, two, three, or more years below grade level? Is professional development really

enabling more teachers to help more students perform at standard? These are the kinds of questions states should be asking, and they should be funding researchers and evaluators to find the answers.

These are just a few of the ways states can become more focused and aggressive in ensuring the integrity and effectiveness of staff development. Such steps are necessary because the quality of staff development is not inconsequential. It can be and should be a lifeline to educators who each day are facing great challenges in their classrooms and schools but do not know how to meet those challenges successfully. If states are not taking the initiative to ensure that staff development is an effective resource for teachers and administrators, states are part of the problem of unsatisfactory student performance, not part of the solution.

Some people in this audience are thinking that they do not have the authority or power to make these kinds of changes in their states' staff development. Maybe that is true. I do not know what power you have, but I do know that you are not without some authority and influence. The question is, what are you choosing to do with what you have?

Conclusion

Where We Are Now

Ten Years of Middle School Reform: A Few Lessons

In these remarks to the annual conference of the National Staff Development Council in December 1999, Hayes Mizell reviewed the history of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Program for Student Achievement and listed some of the most important lessons from his ten years of experience as director of the program. A version of the talk was published in Education Week (August 5, 2000) under the title "Educators: Reform Thyselves."

In 1989, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation set out to encourage and assist a small number of urban school systems to make their middle schools more challenging and engaging. Our theory of action was simple, or perhaps in retrospect I should characterize it as "simplistic." We sought to identify a few school systems where central office leaders wanted to work with two or three middle schools to shift from what we believed was a disproportionate emphasis on affective education to a greater focus on academics. It was our hope that the school systems would take what they learned from this experience and apply those lessons to all other middle schools in their respective school districts.

In the beginning, we did not use either the words "reform" or "achievement." Further, we were not attempting to propagate a specific model for school improvement. We believed that ultimately school systems and schools had to chart their own course toward creating middle schools that would successfully engage all stu-

dents in academic work. Within two years, however, we learned that our approach was too narrow and vague. We began to use the words "reform" and "achievement" more intentionally and more forcefully. We brought in a second tier of several school systems that from the beginning involved all middle schools, not just two or three, in a systemic approach to reform. This effort was somewhat more promising, and for several years we simultaneously funded the first group of school systems, those focused on two or three middle schools, and the second group, those seeking to reform all their middle schools.

This continued until 1995 when the Foundation began a new initiative that we now describe as "systemic, standards-based reform of the middle grades." We began with six school systems, two from the original 1989 group, two from the second group, and two that had no previous relationship with the Foundation. To be eligible for funding, each school system had to establish a quantitative student performance goal, delineating the percentage of students completing the eighth grade in 2001 who would perform at standard in math, science, language arts, and social studies. It has been our hope that, by establishing and publicly committing themselves to their goals, the school systems would consider and take action to implement reforms that will cause significantly greater proportions middle school students to perform at standard by the end of the eighth grade. Although the Foundation did not prescribe what actions the school systems should take, they have chosen to use the majority of their grants for staff development. There is a high degree of accountability in this initiative, with each school system participating in external qualitative and quantitative evaluations.

Our experiences during the past decade have yielded a host of lessons. I will mention only a few of the most important ones here:

First, many policymakers assume that teachers and administrators have a much greater capacity to implement reforms than is

actually the case. These policymakers, whether they be state legislators, state boards of education, or local school boards, are under the illusion that just because they enact a policy, law, or regulation, educators will implement it in the way that the policymakers imagined–I emphasize the word "imagine"–and the beneficial results the policymakers intended will follow. In nearly all cases, the policymakers assume that educators have the necessary knowledge, skills, flexibility, will, and time to bring the policy successfully to fruition.

The fact that we have much more policy than we have reform that improves student performance is testimony to the lack of capacity among front-line educators to implement reforms effectively. This reality demonstrates the need for policy that is less sweeping but more grounded in an understanding of how much change practitioners can learn and implement, at what pace, and what level of support they need to do so. But whether it is policymakers, foundations, or superintendents prompting the reform, they need to understand that there can be no success without intensive, sustained, high-quality staff development. The capacity among teachers and administrators to cause all students to perform at significantly higher levels simply does not currently exist among most educators. This capacity will not exist unless states, school systems, and schools act intentionally to develop it.

A second lesson is that context matters: reform cannot occur in an environment that is indifferent or hostile to it. No matter how much money legislatures and school boards appropriate for reform, and no matter how forceful the mandates for it, reforms that increase student achievement will not occur, except in name only, where educators do not translate reform into new and more effective practice. Reform means difficult professional and perhaps personal change. For these reasons it is understandable that educators welcome reforms that require more of others than of themselves. Reductions in class size, more teachers, equitable

school financing, full service schools, and new school buildings and safer schools are all essential, but they will not cause students to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to perform at standard. That will occur only as a result of more effective leadership at the school and classroom levels, and better teaching. We have learned that when principals and teachers feel the pressure of considered, coherent reform on the one hand, and the support of high quality staff development on the other, they are more likely to embrace change than to resist it in their practice. Indeed, they often become re-energized, believing anew in their ability to make a difference in the learning of their students. Quality staff development can help create the context necessary for productive reform to take root and grow.

Unfortunately, staff development cannot do much about other contextual factors that jeopardize reform. Even in school systems and schools that are serious about making changes to increase student achievement, over and over again we have seen reform jeopardized by the coming and going of school board members, superintendents, principals, and teachers. It seems that just when a school system or school is beginning to develop some hope that teaching and learning can improve, there is a shuffling of key personnel. The real tragedy is that this is accepted in public education. The school board is always looking for a better superintendent, or at least one who is competent but not bold. The teachers union is perennially guarding the prerogatives of experienced teachers to transfer out of the most diverse and economically disadvantaged schools. The superintendent is always moving the productive principals too quickly and the ineffective principals too slowly. School reform cannot survive in this context, and even quality staff development cannot have as profound an effect as it would in a more stable environment. If this is just "how it is" in public schools, it is no wonder more parents are seeking educational alternatives.

Third, site-based management does not guarantee that a hundred flowers will bloom. Where there is a strong, entrepreneurial principal and a highly professional faculty, site-based management may provide the authority they need to implement significant reforms. However, such cases seem to be the exception rather than the rule. The norm is that where one finds effective teaching and higher student performance, it is almost impossible to distinguish the schools that are site-based from those that are not. I suppose one can argue that the reason for this is that in many cases site-based management exists in name only, but on the whole my impression is that schools do not make effective use of the authority and flexibility they currently have. Even though one of our nation's major political parties repeats "returning decision making to local schools" many times a day as a mantra to invoke reform and improved learning, experience does not indicate that this is a promising strategy.

This is not to argue that school systems should discourage site-based management, but rather that it is not as powerful a tool for reform as its proponents claim. In fact, in many school systems it means that neither schools nor the central office play a leadership role in developing and advancing reforms to increase student achievement. Instead, some school boards and superintendents seem to use site-based management as an excuse for why they cannot provide more forceful leadership reform. They say they cannot act because key decisions are reserved to the schools. Schools say they cannot act because, in fact, the central office exercises more authority than it claims. The result is a leadership stalemate that stifles rather than stimulates reform.

Fourth, many school systems and schools have yielded their educational destinies to their states. As the public and state policymakers have become increasingly frustrated by slow, incremental improvements in student performance, they have increased the grip of state assessment and accountability systems. They have

taken these actions because school systems and schools did not respond to previous cues from policymakers that there was growing public dissatisfaction with the quality of schools and the performance of students. Some states, such as Texas and North Carolina, have taken a serious, coherent, and sustained approach to assessment and accountability with apparent good results, though there is strong disagreement about the equity and effects of even these states' approaches. Some school systems are now mimicking their states, developing their own local accountability systems.

The short-term effect seems to be that, as policymakers intended, assessment and accountability systems are driving decisions at the classroom level about what is taught, how it is taught, and how long it is taught. In education this dynamic is called "alignment," but it can produce an unintended consequence that is not healthy for teaching and learning. Because powerful state assessments are now linked to fearsome accountability systems, most school systems and schools think of themselves as being accountable to the state for student performance. Educators expect to be held accountable by their states or school systems, rather than holding themselves accountable for students' performance. They obsess over their students' performance on the state test, rather than over what their students really know and can do, and credible, school-based evidence to support it. Increasingly, educators equate student learning with student performance on the state test, rather than taking the initiative to develop, use, and make transparent more compelling evidence of what students actually know and can do. Perhaps it is unrealistic to think that public education can do better, but I worry that if educators are focused more on their accountability to the state or school district than on their accountability to their students, their internal professionalism will wither.

On a more immediate and practical level, the state tests and accountability systems are so powerful that they threaten to overwhelm all other reforms. Increasingly, reforms are judged by their potential to raise students' scores on state tests, rather than whether they will set in motion a chain of professional behaviors that will result in more substantive student learning. However, until local educators take the collective initiative to hold themselves accountable for causing students to meet and exceed academic standards, and until they persuasively demonstrate, for all the world to see, what their students know and can do, we can expect education to be more about performance on state tests than about deeper student learning.

A fifth lesson is that school reform has no place for ill-conceived, superficial, half-hearted, a dash-here-and-a-dollop-there staff development, descriptions that still apply to most of what passes for staff development in this nation. We now know that what improves classroom practice and school leadership is tailored, intensive, sustained staff development that includes follow-up support, practice, feedback, and evaluation. There simply is no excuse for taking the time of teachers and principals to participate in anything else. Even though more school systems and schools are becoming aware of the features of high-yield staff development, the old approaches prevail. This makes true reform more difficult and unlikely. It is why so much depends on forceful advocacy for high-quality staff development, and on a dramatic change in practice by people at the state, school system, and school levels who are responsible for staff development.

There are more lessons I could share, but I will conclude with just one more. *In every school system, there are some teachers who are deeply committed to their students' learning and some principals who want to lead, not just administer. There are not enough of them, but they are the hope for school reform in this country.* Time and again, they respond to opportunities to learn and strengthen

their practice. They answer sensible calls for reform and give their best efforts to make it produce positive results for students. They are the teachers and principals who need not only the encouragement and support of central office administrators but greater efforts to swell their ranks. For that to happen, the tens of thousands of teachers and principals who are not yet at high levels of professionalism need to see that reform is workable and worthy of their labor. They need to see that their school systems and schools are slashing bureaucratic burdens that have little or nothing to do with increasing student learning. They need to experience school reform as thoughtful and efficient rather than as symbolic and chaotic. They need to know that they and their students are beneficiaries of the reform process, not just pawns of it. For this to occur, many more school boards, superintendents, and central office administrators will have to begin to act very differently. Unless they do, I fear that our greatest and most unfortunate lesson will be that the critics of public schools are right, that school systems cannot and will not reform themselves.

M. Hayes Mizell

SINCE 1987, HAYES MIZELL has been Director of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Program for Student Achievement. He is responsible for the Foundation's initiative to support middle school reforms that will enable all students to meet high academic standards by the end of the eighth grade. The Foundation's initiative supports standards-based reform in the Corpus Christi, Long Beach, and San Diego school systems.

In 1966, Hayes Mizell began his career as an advocate for education reform by working to desegregate schools in South Carolina. He was subsequently involved in a wide variety of activities at local, state, and national levels to improve how public schools serve children from low-income families. He played key roles in building public and political support for the creation of South Carolina's human rights agency, the enactment of state school finance reform legislation, and increasing citizens' involvement in school governance.

When he lived in Columbia, South Carolina voters twice elected Hayes Mizell to that school system's Board of School Commissioners. He served as a school board member in the 29,000-student district (Columbia, SC and environs) during 1971-74 and 1983-86. In the late 1980s he worked with Governor Richard Riley and others in developing recommendations that became the basis for South Carolina's historic Education Improvement Act. In 1979 he was appointed by President Carter as Chairman of the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children, and he served in that capacity until 1982.

During his career he has provided leadership to creating such organizations as Grantmakers for Education, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, and the National Coalition of Advocates for Students.

In 2000, Hayes Mizell became the first non-professional educator to receive the National Staff Development Council's' annual Contribution to Staff Development Award.

In 1999 the National Association of Secondary School Principals presented him the NASSP Distinguished Service Award.

Hayes Mizell's most recent article, "How To Get There From Here," appears in the National Staff Development Council's *Journal of Staff Development* (Summer 2001), pp. 18-20.

For excerpts from Hayes Mizell's speeches, go to: http://www.middleweb.com/HMreader.html.

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206

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